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THE RIVAL ROVERS

OR,

UNCLE BEDROCK'S BIG BREAK.

A ROMANCE OF PADDY'S FLAT.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "DOUBLE SHOT
DAVE," "GILT-EDGE JOHNNY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LOOKING FOR A MAN.

"REGISTER? In course! Put your name down thar. Paddy's Flat's no slouch ov a place, an' we kerry all ther modern improvements ov 'way back East."

Billy Divine shoved the old account-book across the counter, and stood watching the stranger signing his name and place of residence. He was a little curious to know who this new

BY THE BLUE LIGHT'S GLARE OLD BEDROCK AND MAGNATE BEHELD AN ASTONISHING PERFORMANCE.

guest was, and what could have brought a man of his appearance to the Flat.

As the new-comer dropped the pen, Billy drew the book back and allowed his eyes to rest for an instant on the page.

"Lewis Stafford?"

"Glad ter see yer, Mister— Eh? Sounds kinder familier. Lew Stafford! Bless my soul, yes! Kin it be fur a fact?"

Divine stepped back a pace or so until his shoulders rested against the shelving of the bar, and stared at his guest with an eager interest hardly to be excited by an ordinary mortal.

The gentleman by the name of Stafford bore the scrutiny with unruffled front. There was the ghost of a smile on his lips, as though the excitement he caused was not altogether a surprise.

"Not exactly knowing what it is you are speculating about I can hardly answer your question; but the probabilities are you are not very widely mistaken."

"Excuse me! This ain't wot you are used to, but it's ther best Paddy's Flat kin do, an' ef yer kin think ov any thing I might be able ter do ter make things more comfortable, spit it out, an' it sha'n't cost a cent more in ther bill."

"Oh, I have not a doubt but that I shall be fairly comfortable during my stay with you; and as that will not be very extended I do not care to put you to any extra trouble."

"Ef you hed only writ me you war a-comin'! Go in ter build us a railroad, be yer? We need jest sich men ez you be, an' you're welcome ez flowers in May."

Mr. Stafford laughed the laugh of pleased vanity. It was a tribute to his widely known standing that he was recognized even here, in this jumping-off place of all the world.

At the same time he had taken the chances with something of a hope that he would be allowed to pass unnoticed and unknown. Though he was popularly supposed to have no thoughts for anything else but work of that kind, he had not come there to build a railroad. He controlled a few thousand miles of iron track already, which were paying dividends sufficiently satisfactory, even without a connection with Paddy's Flat.

"I am certainly Lewis Stafford, as the book will show; but I do not understand how you came to identify me with the railroad interest so promptly. There are other Lewis Staffords in the world."

"I hev seen you once afore, an' I ain't one ov ther forgittin' kind. It war some year ago, but soon ez I see'd ther name I caught right on. Now, wot kin I do fur you?"

"Well, some supper first thing. After that, can you help me to find a man?"

"I kin do them same, though Paddy's Flat are a mighty uncomfortable place ter be huntin' a man in—ef ther man knows it. 'But ther time yer finds him—zip! Suthin' drops. Are yer heeled?"

"No, no!" laughed Mr. Stafford. "I won't pretend to misunderstand you, tenderfoot though I may seem. I am not hunting my man in that way. Of course I am armed; but, that is rather a matter of form for a person like myself. I do not intend to intrude upon the society of the roughs and hard cases. I have a pistol, though I certainly do not expect to be called on to use it."

"Dunno," responded the landlord, shaking his head gravely. "I wouldn't figger too strong on that. Better keep yer lamps trimmed an' a an' a-burnin'. It's ther unexpected thet happens in a place like this."

"I know; but in my case I think nothing will happen at all."

"P'rhaps. Wot kind ov tools you got? I'm kinder curi'us about them things, an' you kin afford all ther newest frills."

A moment later Billy was staring aghast at the magnate, who good-naturedly felt in his pocket a while, and after removing a handkerchief and a bunch of keys, finally produced a small thirty-two caliber.

"Yer don't mean ter tell me that's ther way yer expects ter kerry an' pull, an' that's ther best yer got?"

"Words of wisdom, landlord. The truth, exactly."

"Bless my soul! Hyar! You jest stuff it in ther. It ain't ov much force, but it's better than nothin' tell you kin git suthin' else. I couldn't spare mine er I would fix yer off right."

"But, really," began Mr. Stafford, showing something like vexation at the movements of the landlord, "I prefer keeping it where it was."

In righteous haste Billy had placed the despised weapon in the side-pocket of the skirt of Mr. Stafford's coat.

"Now, ef any galoot should rub ag'in yer, let him have it through ther linin', so! See?"

"I understand, but I certainly hope I shall have no occasion to profit by your advice."

"It ain't profit yer' lookin' fur when yer pulls trigger, but saving yerself. You've took ther fu'st lesson in ettiket at Paddy's Flat. Now, who's yer man?"

"Really—thanks for your instructions. I will try and remember them. My man? He is a perfect stranger to me, but I have a note of in-

troduction. A friend of mine gave it to me, and said I would probably find him here. Ah, yes! 'Rufus Primrose'. A well-known citizen, if I understood him aright."

Divine broke into a hearty laugh.

"Yer must excuse me; but I couldn't help it," he managed to say, at length. "I reckon I don't know your man; but there's a Rufus Primrose, wot we know only too well, a-hangin' 'round hvar. Rufe Primrose—Ragged Rufe—Uncle Bedrock—but, in course, you don't want him."

"Why not?" asked Stafford, sharply. "I didn't bargain for any Ragged Rufe; but if he is the only person of the name of Primrose about, he must be the man. Produce him and we will see what he says after reading my friend's letter."

"Oh, ye'r way off—yer must be. But, come 'long ter grub. After that mebbe I kin lead him in half-sober, ef you'll hold yer nose shut."

Stafford's appetite was rather sharp-set after the long ride of the afternoon, and while Divine bustled around he stowed away a very comfortable supper, fairly well cooked and served.

Then Billy came to the front again.

"Ef ye'r done, I've got him fur yer—jest caught him ther fu'st clatter. Shell I bring him in?"

"A thousand thanks. If you please. From what you say there is something singular about this matter. Perhaps I can understand it better after I have had a view of the gentleman."

"You're ther doctor, an' kin try, anyhow; but, put a clothes-pin on yer nose, Mister Stafford, fer ye'll need to."

So Billy went out for a moment, and then returned, ushering in the individual he had called Ragged Rufe.

Lewis Stafford had been prepared for a rough specimen of humanity, but he stared aghast.

The fellow was sturdily built, but battered and rough in his appearance. He had an evil looking eye, a bulbous nose, and a mouth well stained with tobacco-juice. His clothing was in tatters, and his hat and shoes a positive revelation.

He came slouching into the room, with a vicious grin on his lips, and the air of one who expects he is going to instant execution—and don't care much whether it's drinks or a lariat noose.

He removed his hat after a style that never belonged to any one but a tramp, and with a bow and a scrape planted himself in front of the railroad king.

"Good P. M!" was his salutation. "Billy—he's allers playin' his jokes, an' I reckon this are another. I kin along because he are a good fellow, but I ain't tryin' ter wring in, nohow. It might mean work; an' that ther Evenin' Blossom ain't on to. You bet! Jest say it war a mistake, an' I'll give yer good-day an' git."

"A moment, if you please. I have no idea whatever as to who the man is I am to meet. If you fill the bill you may be as well as any one else. As your good friend, the landlord, has vouched for your name, I will put my letter in your hands, and you can form an idea whether it was intended for you."

"Ef it's all ther same ter you, who writ that letter? I ain't yearnin' ter peek inter other men's 'pistles, an' ef I heered ther name maybe I'd recognize it. Kinder queer yer friend didn't say what sort er a galoot yer moun't be 'xpectin' ter meet."

"He did make a remark which he may have thought covered the ground," replied Stafford, looking sharply at the ragged rough.

There was something about the latter, something in the cool way he accepted the situation, that made the railroad magnate look twice before deciding there had been a mistake.

Lewis Stafford was no mean judge of human nature.

"An' w'ich remark war those?" asked Rufus.

"Simply that I need not judge by appearances, as Mr. Primrose was occasionally a great deal better than he looked, and improved on acquaintance."

"I guess I'm yer man, then," grinned Primrose. "Mind yer, I ain't tryin' ter wring in; but though I'm a heap good lookin', I'm a big sight better ner I look. Trot out yer letter. Ef it's a satisfactory interdooce I'm open fur a begagement."

"Thanks. I feel complimented. I don't remember a man I would not sooner have found here as Rufus Primrose, but I gave my promise to King, and I shall keep it. He said, 'Don't make a fool of yourself. You want a good man to take you in tow, and I send you to one of the best. After that, if you want to go in on your own account, you take your risk and can get scalped accordingly. I have done my duty.'"

"Pears ez though thar war goin' ter be a chance fur fun. That's jest wot I like. Now, shell I open ther letter?"

"Certainly."

Primrose slowly turned back the flap of the envelope.

CHAPTER II.

RUFUS RISES TO AN EMERGENCY.

"HYAR goes, then," and Primrose unfolded the inclosure.

"Ef you don't know who it are for, how sh'd I? It looks like some ov Beauty King's fool jokes, but I kin stand it ef he kin. I ain't seen his writin' fur a heap long time, but it looks 'mazin' like hissen."

Then, Primrose was silent while he ran his eyes over the epistle.

When he had finished he looked up with a grin.

"I'm ther man fur ther job, an' ef yer don't 'bjeet I kin begin work right now. Thar's jest sich a likely heifer over ter—"

"Sh!" interrupted Mr. Stafford, warningly. "Mention no names and give no points unless you are a great deal more certain than we can be that there is no one to overhear. I don't want all the world to know my business here. See?"

"Oh, they'll ketch on ter it, anyhow; this hyar are ther greatest place in ther world ter guess. An' they hit ther mark most times outer seven."

"I am afraid you are not so far wrong in that. I did not suppose any one here could guess who I was, but the landlord hit me off so exactly I begin to be afraid of the rest of the world. Still, there will be nothing lost by caution. On the strength of my friend King's recommendation, I am inclined to trust a great deal in you, spite of appearances. We will go to my room before we begin to talk this over."

"All right. I'm yer man. Thar's nothin' goin' on fur ther next two hours ez are wuth wastin' time on, an' I kin spend it jest ez agreeable swappin' lies with you ez wrastlin' fur drinks down ter Ante Abe's, whar Billy found me."

This conversation had occurred in the dining-room, and now the two arose and passed out.

Entering the bar-room they came face to face with three men, who stood near the door, in what, to Mr. Stafford, seemed a suspicious attitude.

For a moment the railroad magnate felt as though his enemy, whoever he might be, had found him. It was something of a relief when the nearest of the three made a dart at Primrose, exclaiming:

"Blame yer ugly nibs, we got yer now!"

Mr. Stafford was a man of small experience in points of pistol practice, but he could not help admiring the way Rufus Primrose acted in the emergency.

The instant he heard the voice, and saw the three men, he simply loosened the joints of his knees.

He came down hard and solid, but he knew what he was doing. At the same moment his hands flew up, each claspng a heavy revolver with the hammers back, and the triggers already trembling at the touch of his fingers.

"I've bin thar afore, my frien's, an' ef it's all ther same ter you I want to know what's asked fur afore yer come ary nearer. You observe I've got ther drop; an' sure ez whisk' brings ther drunk I'll blow yer all both three through ef yer monkey 'round this ole dodger."

"By ther rollin' Rockies! He's got us!" said the foremost man, speaking once more, but in a tone of disgust. "Next time we'll pull fu'st, an' talk arterwards. No! We ain't got nothin' laid up ag'in' yer, Mr. Primrose. Me an' my pards, we'll jest retire. 'Scuse us; we made a mistake."

"I sh'd smile," Rufus retorted sarcastically. "Alle-samee, be a little keeful about yer goin'; an' I wouldn't, I reely wouldn't, be layin' out work fur ther next time. You gi'n me a wrinkle jest now, an' you kin bet all yer filthy lucre, me lads, I'll work it fur all it's wuth. You come an' I'll shoot. Don't yer furgit it."

"You wouldn't go fur ter shoot a man with his han's up? They'd hang you sure," averred the man, in some trepidation.

"Don't yer go ter figgerin' wot I'll do, an' wot I won't do. Jest keep yer han's up, an' waltz out afore my nerves gives way, an' I picks on ther trigger. You hear me, Black Burt?"

Stafford had nerve enough, even though it was untired in this direction.

He also had a retentive memory.

The late advice of Billy Divine came back to him, and he saw its soundness on the instant. His hand dropped into his side pocket as though it had always belonged there, and he watched the proceedings keenly, uncertain how soon he would have to take a hand.

An hour before he had never seen Ragged Rufe, and he would have laughed to scorn the idea of his going out of his way to back such a vagabond in a bar-room brawl; but now he felt as though he could not altogether leave him in the lurch; and his presence had more effect than he knew.

"No use, pards," growled Burt. "We ain't takin' no risks, even on a fox-eyed old dead-beat like him. It won't do ter kill him, an' ez it's thar er nothin', we'll jest waltz out. Day-day, Rufus! We'll see yer later."

And with their hands still elevated, the three actually swaggered off.

The moment they disappeared, Rufus executed a quick spring which took him back into the

dining-room. Once there he darted to the nearest window looking upon the street.

The precaution was useless, though it had its effect upon Mr. Stafford, who had partially followed.

Black Burt and his companions had their hands down, and were swaggering away as though nothing unpleasant had happened.

"That's a blame queer move," declared Primrose, when he saw the immediate danger was over. "I wouldn't 'a' thunk it; but I guess it's so. Mr. Stafford, ye'r spotted, sure ez eggs is eggs."

"I? Spotted? What do you mean? They seemed bent on doing you some damage, though for what, or of what kind, they did not say. Stealing a horse, perhaps. I'm not as well-posted as to your antecedents as I would like to be. What I have heard of them has not been to your credit."

"Hoss stealin'? Ther good Lawd! That jest shows. Ef it hed bin anythin' seri'us, like that, you'd 'a' seen ther hull camp hyar, with ropes, an' all ther frills. At fust I did think ov a man over at ther Gulch thet I hed a onpleasantness with las' night, but he war no pard ov Black Burt an' that gang, an' they wouldn't chip unless thar war more behind 'em."

Mr. Stafford appeared incredulous, and briefly expressed his private opinion.

"Ye'r wroag, sure. They hev spotted you, an' while Billy war out they wanted ter size yer up. When Jimmy seen 'em a-goin' fur you he jest ran out ter give ther 'larm. You kin bet yer eyes ther ole man'll be hyar afore long."

The words were prophetic. Scarcely had they been spoken when Billy Divine burst into the room, wild with excitement, and flourishing a six-shooter.

"Don't tell me they done it in my house! Whar's ther onmattered villains? Say ther word, Mister Stafford, an' I'll call out ther boys an' have 'em bung afore they know what hev happened. Ef I hed only bin 'round, they wouldn't hev da'st ter tried it on. It jest breaks me all up ter think ov it."

"Don't be excited, Divine. There has been no harm done, and certainly there was not a word said to me."

"Yes, but it war you they war after. I tell yer, Mr. Stafford, ye'r a marked man, an' yer want ter pernamberlate this hyar burg with consid'able keeffulness ef yer don't want ter be called in all ov a suddin."

"Do you really think so? It seems ridiculous that a perfect stranger should be in danger of his life within an hour of the time he struck the camp. Why, what sort of people have you here? Is assassination no crime; and is a stranger always in danger of his life?"

"Don't talk too much, ef I am ter run this go-cart," warned Rufus, chipping in before Divine had an answer ready. "I ain't sayin' this camp's wuss nor ary other camp, but I'm a-sayin' that when a man like L. Stafford, Esquire, goes abroad fur ter take a journey on bizzness he's allers in danger. It wouldn't be wuth more ner a millyun ter somebody ef he war to retire from ther stock market 'bout twicet as suddint ez he went inter it? Eh?"

The shrewd question shed a new light on the dangers which the man of wealth might be called upon to face. He was impressed by it, but he made no answer, so Rufus went on:

"You kin bet thet whar thar are coin in ary job ther men won't be wantin' ter put it through. You kin figger it up right now, an' ef thar are nobody with a centerest in havin' yer drap, you kin call ole Uncle Bedrock a fool for fun, an' he won't kick ner wiggle."

"It may be so," assented Stafford, after a moment's hesitation, and speaking rather to himself than to Ragged Rufe. "You hit the truth very nearly in one thing. It would be worth money to more than one man for me to stop right here; yet I would not suspect those whom it would benefit of taking such desperate measures."

"Mebbe, then, it would be wuth half a millyun ter hev yer cooped fur a good long breathin' spell. They might only hev come ter bev a squar', naked look at yer, so they'd know yer when they see'd yer ag'in."

"If that was what they were after they certainly took a queer way of disguising their intentions."

"That's w'ot would make it a good one. Mind yer! I ain't tryin' ter skeer yer. Rufe Primrose kin jest play all ther keyards yer puts in his han's fur all they're wuth, an' ef thar's a chainece ter go bu'st he'll never squeal; but I wants yer ter understand w'ots lyin' back fur yer in ther bushes. Then, you kin play ter my lead when ther game opens out, an' we'll hev a chainece ter scoop ther pot, Sabbe?"

"I understand. You scarcely mean to drive me away, since that would certainly not be to your profit. You mean to put me on my guard. Very well, I will be on my guard."

If there is any one trying to play the game you suggest let him, or them, beware. I generally hold my own, and sometimes come out more than even. I may not know much about Paddy's Flat, or the style of men to be met there, but I have a genius for finding out things, and with

such an able assistant as I have I think I need not fear. Not a word of this to outsiders.

"And now, in the first place, Mr. Primrose, pray accept a slight tribute of respect from your devoted friend and try and get into some decent clothes on the first available opportunity. I positively can't go around with an animated scarecrow."

As he spoke Mr. Stafford produced a hundred dollar bill, which he offered to his listening mentor.

"All in good time! all in good time!" responded Rufus, waving the note away. "I ain't sure but w'ot new clothes would darken my wisdom; an' anyhow I ain't arned 'em, an' don't need 'em fur ther present. Le's go to yer room an' talk things over."

CHAPTER III.

WHAT BROKE UP THE PICNIC.

IN spite of its name, Paddy's Flat was quite a thriving town, and it was shrewdly suspected that if the bottom did not drop out of the Spread Eagle, the Elephant Lode, and several other mines of some value though of less importance, an effort would before long be made to change the "handle" with which it had unfortunately been dubbed.

The name did very well when the first rush came, and there were a thousand men camped down on the placers, living in tents, and struggling for hard-tack and salt pork. Now, when there were such residences as those belonging to the principal mine-owners, and other leading men of the town, there ought to be a name in better unison.

Bainbridge, the banker, was the man supposed to have begun the agitation. He was not one of the old settlers, but had been living there for some time, and his daughter and nephew, from the East, had lately joined him.

The young lady had already taken the liberty of naming the trail which led to the residence of her father, "Paradise Avenue," and if she remained any time in the burg, she hoped to hear it spoken of as "Golden City."

Bainbridge, senior, took the matter quite seriously; but the junior found it the subject of a standing joke. Not that he was unmindful of Miss Alta's feelings, but because she could stand a little railery, and because, as he knew more of the population at large, he insisted that the name as it was suited best.

Young Thomas had been brought up by the same relatives who had cared for Alta, and had got to viewing the young lady quite as a sister. Indeed, he often called her that, and a great many people who had seen them together, supposed it to be the actual relationship between them.

Since his arrival at the Flat, he had been an assistant at the bank started by the elder Bainbridge, and which was beginning to prosper. Outside of business hours he was willing to see a little life, and was by no means unpopular in the town. He could laugh with those who laughed, and sympathize with those who were sorrowful. In addition, he was always willing to do a good turn when it was in his power, even to a stranger.

As there was no visible Mrs. Bainbridge, there was plenty for Miss Matilda Johnson to do.

Matilda was a cousin of the head of the family, who had accompanied Alta from the East, and she looked after things in the new house with an interest a merely hired housekeeper would scarcely have done.

There were several others who slept under the roof, but they were drawing regular wages for labor done, and for the present do not need notice.

As Miss Alta had but lately graduated from a school, where she had improved her advantages as well as she knew how, it was no wonder she was not altogether satisfied with either the town or its name. She was not so far wrong when she said to herself she was fitted for better things.

This particular day she was making an excursion which had been under consideration for some weeks, but which had been deferred through lack of an escort. It was only after long waiting Miss Matilda found an opportunity to conscientiously leave household and other cares behind her, and try to find amusement and profit in an outing for a few hours.

The fact of the case was, there was a romantic looking spot up the mountain-side, to the rear of the residence; and as, in that direction, the rocks were supposed to be barren of ore, it was as lonesome as a wilderness, even though it commanded a perfect view of the town, and a fair one of the mining regions.

Besides, there was the prospect down the valley, which Miss Alta had seen in imagination about as clearly as she would ever be able to see it in reality. She intended to make a sketch of it, and had no doubt that from an eyrie she had selected she would be able to do great work.

With sketching materials under her arm, and attended by Aunt Matilda, who carried a little sachel partly filled with a light luncheon, Miss Bainbridge started off on her expedition without taking the trouble to inform the rest of the family whither she was going. It was her intention

to be back long before supper-time, and there was no use to risk a conflict of authority with her brother.

Alta was young, and by no means of the die-away order. Moreover, she had some sort of an idea of the task before her. She started off quite leisurely.

This was as much, or more, on account of Aunt Tilly than on her own.

She would not have hurt the feelings of the elder lady for the world, by any allusion to the difference in age; but she knew that the difference existed, and very thoughtfully acted accordingly.

At first, the ascent was so gradual, neither more than noticed it. There were flowers by the myriad, and just enough of undergrowth to make the way pleasant after they came to the line of timber.

From time to time they stopped and looked back. It did not seem they were reaching desolation very fast. The Bainbridge residence was still in sight, for one who knew where to locate it; and beyond they had glimpses of the Flat, which improved in appearance by the distance of the view.

"Really, I do not see why I might not have made the visit at any time," said Alta.

"The way is lonely, perhaps, but that is no great fault, when one has no escort. I do not see how there could be a particle of danger; and once up there it seems as though home was in speaking distance."

"So it looks now, but things are not always what they seem," replied Miss Matilda, looking around with something like a shiver.

"There may be a pleasure in the trackless shore, as Byron hath it, but for one, I prefer a good sidewalk. There is more chance of being hustled, of course; but then there is so much the more chance of the gallant rescuer being at hand. No, I cannot say I care for solitude, and the charms that sages have seen in its face. I prefer a place with more alarms, that I will understand when I meet them."

"But, with a person of your poetic temperament, I should think it would be just the other way. Life should be a poem; and how can that be when all around you is matter of fact?"

"Poetry is within, and if there is enough of it there will be no need of drawing a supply from without. When the stock on hand is exhausted will be time enough to look around for more from the outside world. At present it just interferes."

Miss Matilda sighed as she finished, and stepped along silently in the wake of Alta, with her eyes half closed. When she got away from her household duties the elder lady was apt to grow abstracted.

Again they walked along for some time in silence. Miss Bainbridge could see enough around to interest her without calling on her companion, who, she suspected, would by no means be in sympathy with her.

About the time she began to feel like a resting spell they had reached the first opening, and though the view here was not what she expected to find it further up, she was willing enough to halt for a little and see what could be made of it.

The prospect was pleasant, but not sufficiently inspiring for a picture. The lower part of the valley was still invisible, and the Bainbridge mansion was not now in the foreground. They would have to go still higher.

After a rest, Alta suggested as much.

"As you choose," sighed Miss Matilda, rousing from a reverie.

"We walk when weary, and we rest not until faint. I think it will be best to reach the further end as soon as possible. Then we will not have so far to go to get home."

Miss Bainbridge smiled. She was accustomed to the phraseology of her relative, and would have been surprised to hear her finish a highflown sentence without an anti-climax.

"If you are tired we can rest here a little longer; but I do not think it is more than half a mile to the other opening, which will be the end of our journey to day. The walking will not be more fatiguing than it has been; and you will have an hour or so for your own, without any one to interfere with the current of your thoughts. When I once fairly get to work with my pencils I might as well be a million miles away, for all the noise I will make."

"Alone, but not alone, since thou art with me. Although I do not say much I rather enjoy company. It gives such a fine opportunity for some one else to do the talking. I shall be quite in my element up there."

She looked upward as she spoke, and drew a long breath. Probably she alluded to the fresh air when she spoke of her element. Alta thought so, for she answered with a light little laugh:

"Of course you will. You did not suppose I thought you were a fish?"

The half a mile, however, turned out to be nearer two, and the way was rougher than the young lady had counted on. Matilda struggled on gamely, but was quite out of breath when the two scrambled up the huge rock, the top of which

they had seen from a window of the Bainbridge dwelling before starting.

"Ah!" exclaimed Alta, as she looked down the valley with an air of enthusiasm.

"It has been quite a scramble, but the view repays me. How is it with you?"

"Where hardly a human foot could pass, or a human heart would dare, we have made our way; but I wonder what they will have for supper? I suggested flap-jacks and syrup, but there is no reliance to be placed in what Eliza Jane will do, in spite of the most solemn promises."

"Don't worry about that. They will have something, and whatever it is, I have no doubt we will have an appetite for it, our luncheon to the contrary, notwithstanding."

"Pease porridge hot, and pease porridge cold—all is to be fish, I suppose, that comes into our net. It is long past noon already. Suppose we see what there is in the sachel."

"There is a suspicious-looking bottle, for one thing, though I can assure you it is not filled with anything more harmful than cold tea. Biscuits and beef, the latter all the way from Chicago, for another, or others," said Alta, taking out the articles as she enumerated them. "And here is a goodly portion of the cake confiscated from the safe, with especial reference to your tastes. Quite a feast. It is a pity we have not guests who could appreciate the completeness of the outfit, as these Westerners would call it."

"I fear the funeral bake-meats will but coldly furnish forth the feast for such guests as we are about to have. I see them both in my mind's eye, and otherwise, and I like not their looks. Don't be frightened; but I am afraid our pleasure-trip is not going to have an altogether merry ending. If they are not outlaws of the first water, it is because they belong in a stronger class, that takes nothing but whisky."

"Where—what do you mean?" asked Alta, not certain whether there was any call for alarm.

"Do not show any agitation, for that would but make it the worse. They are right behind you, and advancing cautiously up the rock. The leader has a pistol drawn, and looks dreadful in a black mask, and cross-barred pantaloons."

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN COLUMBO AND HIS BLACK DOVES.

If Alta had been more in sympathy with Paddy's Flat and its gossip, she would have heard more of a certain outlaw who had made his appearance in the neighborhood, with quite a gang of men at his back.

From time to time she had heard the name of Captain Columbo mentioned in connection with a stage robbery, and understood that the gang were known as the Black Doves, but had hardly given the matter a second thought, and certainly had apprehended no danger from them when planning her expedition.

When Matilda mentioned the black mask, however, she recalled all that she had heard on the subject, and felt that it was as well to begin at once to be prepared for an adventure.

Not expecting to meet any one, she had prudently left her little purse at home, where there was no danger of its getting lost. If her companion had been equally as prudent, the outlaws would not gain a fortune, at any rate.

While she was thinking she was also acting, though the part was very simple.

She handed the bottle containing the cold tea in the direction of Matilda, with some weak remark about drinking hearty, or the like. If the outlaws intended to give them a surprise, it might be as well not to disappoint them, in that at least. It might make them more amenable to reason when they found that there was no wealth about their victims.

So, it was upon quite a composed pair of ladies that the outlaws intruded, though it was only the leader who stepped forward with a graceful tip of his hat, and quietly remarked:

"Sorry to put you to any inconvenience, and more sorry still to cause alarm, but you must consider yourselves prisoners until further notice."

Matilda uttered a little cry of surprise, as though, for the first time she was aware of the presence of the intruders, while Alta turned coolly in the direction of the voice.

"And who are you, sir? and by what right do you take it upon yourself to pronounce us your prisoners?"

"Very natural questions, under the circumstances, and I do not know that there is any objection to answering them. I represent Captain Columbo, and these men behind me are a contingent of the Black Doves. It is hardly possible that those names can be entirely unknown to citizens of Paddy's Flat."

"You are, in other words, a thief, and these men behind you part of your gang. Quite an adventure, this, though one which will hardly prove profitable to either of us. We did not come expecting such an emergency, and unless my companion is better prepared than I there is not a cent here to be handed over to your keeping."

"Please, don't!" exclaimed the outlaw, waving his hand in a way which said he was horrified at the bare thought.

"Certainly, you cannot suppose we would be

so brutal as to take from you any little spare change you might carry with you. We are not of that two-penny order, I assure you. Oh, no! It is the gentleman down at the Flat, who runs the bank, we are after. And if I know anything about such matters, I think we have got him."

"I do not think I entirely understand you," replied Alta, still on her dignity. "Mr. Bainbridge—if that is the gentleman you mean—is not here; and if your dealings are to be with him what reason have you to interfere with us?"

"Quite a natural question for one who is not accustomed to the business ways of the Black Doves. It is not an original method, I am free to confess, but one borrowed from gentlemen in much the same line of labor, who make their home in the Apennines. We take hostages to fortune, and as we select with care they are generally reclaimed without much demur. You could hardly think it, now, but as you sit there, with that pretty flush on your handsome face, and that fawn-like look in your eyes, you are worth to us every cent of twenty thousand dollars. As Mr. Bainbridge never has less than that sum on hand, I do not think there will be much delay in our realizing on our investment; and forever afterward you two will be free of the guild."

"I think, sir, that you must be a little demented to attempt such a game as that. You would never realize any such sum out of it; and if harm came the result would be the extirpation of the gang, whose existence has been a standing disgrace to the men who allowed it."

"I do not think you are in a mood to do justice to the men of the Flat, who have only let well enough alone, because they could do no better. Of course, there is some slight risk in our calling—but not more than in many other more popular avocations. I think that we have provided for all possible contingencies."

"Except the one of a man of means setting seriously to work to have you hunted down and hung. In such cases the private prosecutor accomplishes more in a day than the slower going gentlemen of the law do in a week. If you are wise you will withdraw, and leave us to the enjoyment of our own concerns."

"A fair warning," laughed the outlaw, who spoke with the utmost politeness. "I am afraid you do not give us credit for being as desperate as we really are; while, on the other hand, you have taken a fancy that we are indirectly threatening you. That last would be in bad taste, besides being entirely unnecessary. It is the gentleman we intend to threaten, and I assure you we know how to carry on that part of the business. While you are enjoying our hospitality to the top of your bent, the old gentleman will be suffering all the tortures of a despairing father. You cannot conceive how we will toast him—and it is just as well that you cannot. You would not have near as comfortable a time."

While the outlaw talked he seemed to be studying his prisoners with care, dividing his attention about equally between Alta and the other lady.

On the other hand Alta was listening attentively, striving if possible to read between the lines, if by any chance she could make out what was best to be done in the case. She began to believe the words of the man in the mask to be no empty threat, and the affair took on an aspect she had not dreamed of at the first.

If the Black Doves positively intended to proceed to such extremities as were threatened it might be as well to see if some bargain could not be made for an immediate release. Twenty thousand dollars was more than Alta herself had at her command; but there was a certain little fortune of her own, segregated as it were from her father's other effects, though in his hands, which she felt clear was at her disposal, if Thomas Bainbridge would not otherwise ratify any bargain she might make. When she spoke again it was in a different tone.

"You certainly cannot dream we could have what you call a comfortable time, knowing the suspense caused even by our absence. It may be that in my surprise I have spoken too hastily. If so, pray overlook it. You have taken some trouble to lay your plans, as well as to put them in execution. Thomas Bainbridge is not the man to think you should receive any recompense for such irregular work; but I might be led to take that view of it. Can we not deal directly?"

"Certainly, if you are authorized to draw a check for the amount mentioned. As a rule I object to doing business with ladies, but for your accommodation I would sacrifice my prejudices."

"I can draw the check if you have the materials; but it cannot be for any such sum as you mentioned. The very idea is preposterous. I doubt if there is twenty thousand dollars in actual money to be found in the Flat."

"So much the worse for the Flat, to say nothing of your father. We cannot alter our figures. If you can give us the amount—of course we would have to receive it in full, in coin or bullion—we shall be only too happy to escort you to the limits of the town, but otherwise it is time

to draw this very interesting conversation to a close. As we interrupted your luncheon, we will give you a few minutes to finish it. Then, we positively must begin our journey. We have quite a distance to cover before night, and I am anxious to have it done and over with. Captain Columbo, whom I simply represent, will begin to be anxious if we do not make our appearance in due time."

"Ah, then you are only a minor ruffian, after all. Had I known that, I would not have wasted so much time. Of course, I would prefer dealing with the principal. Thanks for your few minutes of grace. The unexpected catastrophe has not altogether taken away, my appetite, though I confess it is not as keen as it was before you put in an appearance."

To prove the truth of what she said, she turned away to the little lunch and attacked it with a gusto not altogether feigned.

From the moment Alta took up the conversation with the leader of the Black Doves, Miss Johnson maintained a discreet silence, though she watched the conference with an anxious look. She was well aware she was a minor factor in the game, but for that reason was unable to decide whether her own danger was the greater or the less.

If she had not been possessed of a great deal of courage, she would not have been able to maintain so well an outward show of calmness, but when it came to eating, drinking, and being merry under such circumstances, her nerves got the better of her. She went through a few motions, and then almost choked.

"Excuse me, miss," said the representative of Captain Columbo. "You need be under no apprehension that our larder is not well stocked, and that our visitors may suffer from hunger. Your appetite may be poor at present. Do not force yourself to eat. There will be no long fast, unless you so will it."

"With good sweet potatoes, and turkeys and rice, no doubt but our supper will be everything nice," quoted Miss Matilda, started by the direct address.

"At the same time, it is poor praying on an empty stomach. I will try and brace myself now, since the things which are unseen are by no means certain."

Then, in an effort to swallow a mouthful of canned boiled beef without sufficient mastication, she came so near to bringing on a final catastrophe, that Alta was compelled to beat her on the back, while the outlaw made himself useful by proffering her the cold tea.

"Enough of this nonsense," said Alta, firmly, when her relative had somewhat recovered, though still very red in the face.

"We are both too anxious to know the worst, or the best, to care for anything else. If we are to be taken before your captain, lead us there at once. If he is wise he will see that we reach the town before our absence has been noted. If pursuit once begins it will never cease till the country is rid of you all."

"If you are ready I will lead the way. And I hope you will pardon me for a word of advice, which you can understand is entirely disinterested."

He paused, as though his words had been a question.

Alta quietly bowed her head in token of assent. She could not help but admit to herself that this was a very gentlemanly fellow, considering the work he was engaged in. It would do no harm to listen.

"It is simply this:

"I do not mind a little plain speaking, and can allow for personal prejudices. Captain Columbo is different. If you are wise you will not treat him with the bluntness you have used with me. He might adopt your very suggestions, though they have been so far totally unthought of. You will bear me witness that I have done my spitting as gently as I could, and can perhaps believe me when I express my unqualified regret that a matter of business has compelled me to put you to some temporary inconvenience. If you are ready now, we will proceed."

"As ready now as later on," responded Alta briefly, and making no comment on his advice, simply bending over to gather up the remnants of the interrupted feast.

"Do not bother yourself with them. One of the men will see there are no fragments wasted—and no tell-tale articles left lying around."

He spoke a little more sternly than he had yet done, and Miss Bainbridge thought it best to heed the gesture with which he accompanied his words. She clasped Matilda's hand with her own, and quite solemnly followed the outlaw.

For a little while their way led down the mountain-side over the same route by which they had come.

Then, they turned abruptly, and after some minutes came to a halt.

"We are aware that you are a finished equestrienne; it is to be hoped your relative is a fair one. There is quite a journey before you, and it will have to be taken on horseback."

"A steed, a steed, of matchless speed," whispered Matilda, at the same time. She had caught sight of a horse's head among the shrubbery.

"There are several more of them," informed the outlaw, catching her words, and turning toward her as he spoke. "Your enthusiasm shall be gratified, since I will be compelled to have the pleasure of assisting you both to mount. You first, Miss Bainbridge. And I hope I need not caution you how foolish it will be to nourish a hope of escape."

CHAPTER V.

A GIRL'S COURAGE.

THE journey lasted for several hours, and before the first ten minutes were over both the ladies were thoroughly bewildered.

At first, Alta had thought she would keep her wits about her, and take sufficient note of the way to be able to describe it; but she soon gave up the idea, and resigned herself to her fate. One thing she did notice.

Although he said nothing, the officer who had at first played such a prominent part rode at her side, while the way was led by another of the gang, who, so far, had not opened his lips.

And if she was not much mistaken, he led it according to his own pleasure.

It was well on toward evening when a halt was made, and the tired captives were glad enough to slide to the ground, and follow their guide to a spot where they could obtain a little much needed rest.

After an hour, or so, they had a call from the man with whom they actually seemed to be getting acquainted.

He still wore his mask, but they had no difficulty in recognizing his voice and figure.

"I am sorry necessity compels what may seem to be an intrusion. While you stay here such contingencies will arise, although I think it is likely for the most part you will be left alone. Is there anything that we can do for your comfort?"

"What a question!" exclaimed Alta, sharply. "Certainly, if you had let us alone there would have been no need to ask it."

"I understand; and therefore am the more anxious to make the necessities of the case as little onerous as possible. There will be a fire here after a little; and Marquita will bring you some supper. After that Captain Columbo requests an interview."

"Why not say, demands?"

"Because it is entirely optional with yourself. It seems I have been specially detailed to look after your comfort and safety, and while I am on that duty, which has both its pleasant and its unpleasant features, you will not be compelled to receive any one else."

"Truly, you are a considerate set of ruffians. You have possibly told this same Captain Columbo that I wished to deal directly with him, if a deal could at all be made."

"I am sorry to have to say I did not. The captain does not allow suggestions after he has once made his plans, and it would have hardly been worth while. If you will kindly be guided by the advice I gave you, I think it will be all the better for you, and I shall certainly feel more comfortable."

"Thanks. I shall endeavor to be prudent, though I am plain-spoken, for the most part, and cannot forget with what manner of men I am dealing."

"So much the more reason for caution. Let that go, however. You have a full supply of blankets, and the couch arranged for you and your relative, you can see, is not the most uncomfortable one in the world. Try and enjoy yourself as best you can, and by to-morrow we may have word for you from your father. You will find it useless to attempt to say anything to Marquita; she is deaf."

Alta had an answer at the tip of her tongue, but let it go no further.

Ruffian though he might be he had been fairly considerate thus far, and it might be as well to make an early application of his advice.

She allowed him to depart without comment or question.

After a while Marquita came.

As Alta had guessed from her name, the woman, as far as she could tell from appearances, was a Mexican. She came in quietly, with a tray in her hands, on which was a substantial supper. When she had placed that before the prisoners she busied herself making a fire.

A little recess in the rock served for a fireplace. Directly a flame was started, the smoke went up after a fashion which showed plainly there was an opening above.

Alta watched the woman at her task. There seemed to be no need to hurry over the repast, and she was interested in knowing what manner of person Marquita was.

She was both young and handsome, though her beauty was of a savage sort, as it seemed to Alta. After a little she softly whispered:

"Marquita!"

The woman addressed never turned her head, or gave the least evidence she heard the word. Alta tried again, and in a louder tone.

Either Marquita was deaf, as the outlaw had said, or else was well trained. Not a trace was there of anything to show she knew she had been

spoken to. When the fire began to blaze up she gave a glance at the tray, and then glided away.

"She does not look altogether bad," whispered Alta, after a momentary silence; "and I am not yet sure she is as deaf as the young man would have us believe. It is a slender thing to pin one's faith to, but I have hopes Marquita will be of service to us yet."

"Ah, who so blind as those who will not see?" asked Miss Matilda, showing by both words and manner that she was still in the poetic vein, though her subsequent words were even more matter of fact than usual.

"If she was deaf as a post we will find some way to get at her understanding, provided we can once make up our mind she can help us."

"Don't speak so loud. Of course, we must expect to fall back on our relatives if the worst comes to the worst; but meantime I am as anxious to save that twenty thousand dollars as they are to get it, and it will not do to let them know the least bit about our hopes or fears. I think when I have once seen Captain Columbo I will have a better idea of what we may expect."

"A monster, no doubt, of so hideous a mien that to be hated needs but to be seen. Yet—"

"No need to repeat the rest of it, my dear," interrupted Alta, smiling in spite of her woes.

"There is not the slightest danger I will go to such extremities."

"Of course not; but women are strange I am free to admit, even though I belong to the sex. Perhaps it would be as well to eat supper, and wait till you have seen the captain before trying to explain."

"Glad to see you are recovering your courage. I began to fear you were overwhelmed. And for girls in our situation that would not do at all. We must have all our wits about us."

Matilda smiled somewhat grimly. She was aware she was rather an elderly girl, and under the present circumstances the flattery did not touch her.

In silence the two ate, with an appetite not as sharp-set as it would have been had all things gone as they had expected, and the meal was being made under the Bainbridge roof-tree.

"Are you ready for the interview with Captain Columbo?"

Just when Alta declared she could eat no more she heard the question, and looking up saw the outlaw lieutenant at her side.

"As ready now as at any other time. Lead me to him if he will not deign to shed the light of his countenance on our humble quarters."

"You do him injustice. The captain has met with a slight accident in the line of his profession, and it would be inconvenient, and perhaps painful, to call upon you."

Alta raised her eyebrows at the explanation, and then motioned for him to lead the way. She was not sure whether to be glad or sorry over the information.

A wounded man with strength to carry on a conversation would still be apt to be more irritable than usual—unless so hard hurt as to be capable of considering his latter end.

The lieutenant carried a torch, which he held above his head, and Alta followed him sedately, finding her way without trouble.

Miss Matilda would have preferred to make one of the party, but when she rose to her feet with the intention of going along, Marquita silently appeared in front of her, holding out a hand.

The gesture was a command there was no resisting, and the lady with the poetic temperament, catching at the same time a nod from Alta, sunk down again in the attitude of one who can silently endure.

Captain Columbo received his unwilling guest in a room which resembled the one she had just left in size, but was vastly more comfortably furnished.

There was a hanging lamp which made the place fairly cheerful, there were several comfortable seats, and on part of the floor was a carpet.

The captain reclined on a lounge the workmanship of which was hidden by the skin of a grizzly bear.

Though his face was masked as effectually as any Alta had yet seen, the young lady paused and stared at him, like one who has met the unexpected in a not altogether pleasant shape.

"The individual we were speaking of, I suppose?" he said, turning toward the lieutenant. "If so, Hawk, you may retire, and she may be seated."

The words were not unkindly spoken, though Alta shuddered while she listened.

The voice of the speaker was a deep base, and left the impression that its possessor was one who was accustomed to the giving of orders, and the seeing that they were obeyed.

"As you wish, my captain," answered Lieutenant Hawk, with a low bow.

"I will be in the ante-room."

The captain turned again.

"As Hawk probably told you, I have met with a slight accident which renders it inexpedient for me to move more than is necessary. The fact will explain any seeming discourtesy. I sent for you, both to make sure you had no especial grounds of complaint, and to impress on your mind that while as a matter of business

we are compelled to treat a member of the gentler sex with some little harshness we are anxious not to go beyond the exigencies of the case."

The words were deliberately spoken, and meantime Columbo had his gaze fixed directly upon the young lady.

The light fell upon his eyes so that when Alta looked up at him they seemed to be peering directly into her own.

The result was—a shudder. There was something so lifeless about them, and yet so cold-bloodedly cruel! They were utterly and completely black, but without the least sparkle or glow.

As Alta did not speak, Captain Columbo went on:

"I hope there will be nothing more disagreeable about your visit than a temporary separation from your friends, and a day or so of what will in after life seem to have been but romantic adventure. If it should turn out otherwise no one will regret it more than myself. Your father—he is a reasonable human being, is he not?"

"So far as I have noticed I should say he was; and for that reason he will be none the more willing to be robbed."

"Try and tone down your language, young lady, and keep it suited to the situation. Some allowance can be made for what seems on your part to be only natural indignation. I suppose Hawk has fully explained the terms we have offered?"

"I suppose so; and he has no doubt given you the opinion I expressed as to the probability of their acceptance. You have simply made a ridiculous blunder, and the sooner you do all in your power to remedy it the better it will be for all parties concerned."

At first Alta had felt awe of the cold, calculating schemer, with the lack-luster eyes and even tones. When he turned her attention back to her own affairs the awe began to turn into anger.

"I think you underrate both his affection for you, and his good sense. We have been careful to strike only when we knew he was in condition to meet our demands, and well posted as I am in regard to his every feeling and foible I think I can rely on his seeing the justice of our demands. If not brilliant, Bainbridge has a fund of hard common sense which will hardly fail him now."

If Alta had not been deeply anxious she would have been highly amused.

Captain Columbo spoke as though there could be no question as to the legitimacy of the business in which he was engaged.

"You say you know my father well?"

"Yes, my child; and hate him as cordially as I ever hated any one on this round globe. Were it not for that fact I do not think I would have been willing to enter into this game, which, I confess, has its repulsive features. I am enjoying all the agony which I am certain Thomas Bainbridge feels; and the best of it is that he will not suspect for a moment the identity of the hand which has dealt him this blow."

"Ah, then there is more than mere money behind this outrage?"

"Very true. There is as wholesome a case of revenge as you ever heard of. Not that I wish to visit the sins of the father on his children; but through them I find the opening to begin my work."

"You are unwise to tell me this. True or false it will make me all the more positive in resisting any such levy as that you have named. I would be willing to pay a reasonable sum myself, sooner than live in discomfort, surrounded by danger. But I can see, now, it is your desire to set an unreasonable figure, to enhance the unpleasantness of the circumstances. I might have been willing to attempt to convince you of your error, and come to some terms, but since I know the truth I shall waste no breath. A Bainbridge can accept whatever fate has in store. You shall have neither revenge nor ransom. Before this game is over I doubt if you will be so positive. When it has ended it is more than likely there will be no Captain Columbo."

"I like your courage, child, even if you are a daughter of Thomas Bainbridge. But, do not be foolhardy. Captain Columbo is an uncertain man in his temper, and a bad one to rouse. It may be as well to bring this interview to a close. To-morrow I may require you to write a letter, though I hope matters will be settled before that."

He touched a bell as he ceased speaking, and in answer to the summons, Lieutenant Hawk appeared to escort her back to her quarters. The journey was made without a word by either, and Alta found Miss Matilda sleeping the sleep of the innocent. A little later she had herself passed through the gate of dreams, and had forgotten that Columbo and his Doves had an existence.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. STAFFORD OPENS HIS CAMPAIGN.

MR. STAFFORD might not be accustomed to the associations which were apparently the

inevitable thing in Paddy's Flat, but he had courage of his own, and imagined he had also a quick wit.

This was no vain supposition. Just those two qualifications, though exercised in a different sphere, had made Lewis Stafford what he was, and he understood the fact as well as any one else.

The preliminary conversation in his room was rather vague, since he did not think it worth while to give any very full explanation of his ends, but confined himself to his means.

Primrose was shrewd enough to see this, and to make a guess or two at what lay beyond.

"Perhaps ye'r' right, Mister Stafford. It don't go to do ter be trustin' ther fu'st man yer meets; an' it ain't none er my bizz w'ot's lyin' abind all this byer. I mou't do better ef I knowed w'ot war ter be the end ov it; but I reckon I kin do well ernuf as it are."

"It is not that I do not trust you, Mr. Primrose," replied Stafford, giving a quizzical look at the ragged old fellow in front of him. "Your appearance is enough to indicate you could be trusted with untold millions—especially if they were in the vault of a bank, and the door locked. There is a reason much better, the force of which you may be able to see yourself."

"In course, in course! Pore shote ov a man ez can't give reasons thicker ner huckleberries on a Pennsylvania mounting; an' them ez he furgits ter give'll be ther best ov all. Drive on, ez ther road seems ter be ther clearest, an' Rufus'll try ter foller."

"Don't misunderstand me. I want to find a young lady, and I give you all the data I have on the subject. Why I want to find her is my own affair, and though I do not care whether you know it or not, there are some others in the world that I do not wish to possess the knowledge until it is too late to do them any good."

"Prezactly, prezactly! An' I mou't leak. That's good ernuf fur me."

"There is where you are wrong. I am not afraid of anything of the kind. But, if we once begin to talk of it we will keep up the conversation, in season and out of season, and if it is a fact that I am already the object of attention, there is no telling how soon some one will overhear us. I suspect we will be spied upon, and I want to make things safe. When we find the young lady will be time enough to consider what is to be done with her."

"No harm, I reckon. Ef I tho'rt so I'd sooner take a hand in on ther other side. I don't gush nobow on buckin' ag'in' a woman."

"A fair shake of the handle of the pump, but it won't work. You must go it blind or not at all. I should think you could trust to it that Lewis Stafford would hardly be after any evil."

"Speshully w'en he registers onder his own name. Yes, I guess I kin trust yer that fur. An' now, w'en do yer want ter begin on this hyer double-barreled affair? An' are yer goin' ter take it slow an' easy, er rush along fur all thet's out?"

"It must be rushed, of course. I have not the time to spare for this excursion, but I figured I could get out with not more than a hundred thousand behind, and I was willing to sacrifice that much for the sake of doing what I thought was the proper thing under the circumstances."

"Rush goes, then. You actooally wants ter find a old man an' a young woman, er a young man an' a ole woman, an' yer ain't sure w'ich?"

"Yes, and it is that circumstance which complicates matters, and makes me fear the search may take longer than I have the time to spare for it? I think I have given you all the points I have to go on, and you must consider which way we had better turn first."

"You reckon they are both tergether?"

"I am not so sure even of that, though I am inclined to think they are."

"Mebbe, then, I kin hit it ther fu'st clatter. I kin put me finger straight on ther ole woman, an' she hez a young man w'ot may fill ther bill."

"Humph! I would sooner it was the other way," muttered Stafford to himself; "but it is no use to borrow trouble until I am sure it is the party."

"In course thar are other ole men an' other ole wimin, with kids in tow rangin' frum ten ter fifty; but this hyer looks ter be ther right thing at fu'st glance. Might go down an' intervoo 'em."

"So we might, but would it not be better to first find out something about them. It will hardly do to be asking questions of all suspicious characters as to who they are, and what their past lives have been."

"Betcher sweet life I understands all that. It war acause I knowed suthin' 'bout 'em heretofore that I dropped onder 'em."

"Speak out, then. There is no use to waste time, beating about the bush."

"Woman hez see'd better days, an' young man moreover. Her ole man war killed at Weavertown, twenty year ago, er somethin' ter that effect. An' Weavertown war a startin' pint ter speak, in ther shortness ov ther story you war a-givin' me."

"That is so. The find looks probable, and it may be as well to try it without delay. But

there were a good many men killed at Weavertown, first and last."

"That's Gospel, but we got ter go ter work on our luck ez we ain't time fur fine play. An' ef it's luck we are tyin' to ther fu'st sign are apt ter be ther best one. I kin go down an' see w'ot ore I kin make outen her."

"Thanks; but it will be your part to point out the parties, and I will do the interviewing. As a commencement we will go down together."

"Jest ez you have it. But, recomember, ef thar's ary show ov shootin', an' sich like frills, you better let me do ther leadin', an' don't you be too blame anxious ter trump my trick. I'd sooner play a lone hand than to hev a pard w'o didn't know when it war too soon ter chip heavy."

"My dear sir, that is what I want you for, and the reason why I prefer to have you more respectably dressed. In case of a difficulty there would be more show for you with the outsiders."

"Don't you worry 'bout that. I'll git on me Sunday duds w'en my grip comes over frum Dogtown, whar I bin havin' headquarters. Meantime, they know me hyer, an' yer kin bet I know them."

"Let us start, then."

Rufus pursed up his thick lips with his pudgy hand, and looked as though he was not altogether ready for the movement, yet did not care to object.

He nodded to himself several times, and then led off without another word.

Stafford had asked but few questions, and Primrose had not thought it worth his while to offer any gratuitous explanations. Time enough for that if the railroad king failed to understand the situation when he was brought on the ground.

As they walked along Stafford's head was bent down, and he seemed to be in deep thought. Evidently, the appearance of his companion was not troubling him as much as Ragged Rufe had feared.

Their way led from the hotel, toward the outskirts of the town, through a street that was occupied almost entirely by dwelling-houses.

For this reason they met but few persons, and they all were hurrying along, either to get home, or to get to the regions of the saloons. The appearance of the two seemed to attract but little attention.

Nevertheless, if Stafford had been watching him, and the light had been a little better, he might have seen that Primrose was keeping a sharp lookout, his eyes roving around to scrutinize any possible places for ambuscade.

Quiet though it might seem this was the place to look for danger.

Finally, Stafford perceived something of the kind.

"If we are to get much further away from the base of operations, it might have been as well to have brought a small army along with us. I have not been in the place very long, as you are aware, but what I have seen has led me to believe it equal to its reputation. And I did hear it spoken of along the stage-route as being an uncertain spot after dark."

"Don't worry tell ther time comes. Ain't I with yer? An' it's on'y a step furdur. Down in ther holler, yander."

He pointed as he spoke, and though Stafford managed to glance in the direction indicated, he gained but little information by the look. It was dark in front of him, it was black in the near distance.

"We go down there, do we? I must say, it is as likely a place for a murder as I would want to pick out."

"Kayrect, an' a tol'able guess fur a tender-foot. Thar's bin more ner one on 'em in them regions, ef ther boys speak ther truth. But, ef yer feels anyways jebious about it you kin go back, an' I'll intervoo ther ole gal. I don't reckon we'll find ther boy at home. It's most his time ter be at work."

"Oh, I do not intend to stop for any danger which I cannot see and understand. I think I would sooner go on than turn around alone. If any one has been following us it would make a meeting just too easy."

Stafford fell into slangy ways of talk himself, at times.

"Level talk, that. But now, fur a leetle while, mebbe, it would be jest ez well not ter talk at all. Thar's no telling who may be on ther same route, an' I don't keer ter give ourselves away. Hist! I think I hear s'uthin' now."

The hand of Primrose dropped warningly upon the shoulder of his charge, and his voice sunk to a whisper as he halted suddenly.

Both men listened, and soon there was a faint sound in the distance, as of men moving cautiously, which came quite positively to the ears of the magnate when he had listened for a minute or two.

If anything, that sound made him suspicious, for it did not seem possible Primrose could have heard it any sooner. It was more likely, so Stafford thought, that the tramp knew just about when to listen for it.

If so, was he a safe man to trust?"

"Hyar's ther spot. Now, lay low. He's bound ter come this way in less ner a minnit. When he comes, no baby work, but slug him, sure, an' fer keeps. See?"

The whispered order was distinctly heard by the two listeners, and for a few seconds Rufus was in deadly danger. Stafford's hand was in his side-pocket, for he thought he scented treachery. If anything happened, and his guide failed him, he meant to try and get a grain or two of satisfaction, at all hazards.

Then, straight ahead, but at what seemed to be quite a little distance, there was a momentary flare of light, and as it disappeared again, the sound of a closing door.

After that a free, careless step came straight toward them.

"Thar he comes, at last," whispered the same man who had before spoken. "Lay low, now, an' at the right time wade in."

CHAPTER VII.

SCIENCE VERSUS STRENGTH.

"THAR's yer young man now," whispered Primrose, and though he bent over so that his lips almost touched Stafford's ear, the words were scarcely audible.

"And this gang seeks to take his life. I wonder if it can be on account of my coming? If so, I have indeed hit it 'the first clatter.'"

So thought Stafford to himself, and he turned toward the tramp, now as keenly alert as a terrier.

"I have no use for him, but I cannot stand by and see a murder done. Shall we shout him a warning, or move forward to his assistance?"

"Don't you worry 'bout that young man. Ef thar are anybody kin take keer ov hisself, it's jest that same. Pity it ain't light ernuf ter git all ther fine pints, but ef yer watches right close, prehaps you'll be able ter see ther fur fly."

"It may be fun to you, but to me it is, or will be, something more. He *must* be saved. If you will not make a move, I shall have to do the best I can, and try it alone."

The chuckle which Ragged Rufe gave was only too audible.

"He'll do ther savin', an' don't yer furgit it. Betcher life on it thet he's already dropped to ther leetle game. You jest stay out er you may git a sore head, an' it's dog-sure you can't do ary good on this rastle."

Then Primrose pulled his man down, whispering as he did so:

"Lay mighty close, er some stray lead may come our way. He's a tearer when he gits on ther war-path, an' I think he's turnin' his face that way now."

While the whispered conversation was going on, Stafford was keeping one ear open to note the advance of the footsteps, and he knew the pedestrian could not now be far from the ambuscade.

To enforce the warning, Rufus had put one hand over his mouth, while the other held him down. There seemed to be nothing better to do than to wait in silence. The ground was totally unfamiliar, the parties were unknown, and this kind of work was something in which the magnate was totally inexperienced.

Then there rose an angry snarl, and the sounds of rushing footsteps, as the hidden men darted out of their covert. It was too late now to shout a warning, and the party was too far off to interfere.

So Mr. Stafford thought as he resigned himself to the situation, and nervously waited for some further sounds to show how the contest was going.

In an instant there was noise enough; but there was something more, which the assailants had not bargained for.

There was a sudden glare; a blue-light lit up the scene.

Short as the time had been, a great deal of work had been accomplished.

Only, it was work done the other way from that which Stafford had been fearing.

By the blue light's glare Old Bedrock and the magnate beheld an astonishing performance.

One man lay stretched motionless on the ground, just where the first stroke of the intended victim had laid him.

Another was staggering back from the effects of a blow, while a third was writhing under a gripe by no means gentle, but in a moment the fellow went up into the air, and then fell to the ground with a crash.

"Any more to come?" asked the victor, coolly, stepping back a pace or two and looking carelessly around him.

"I shouldn't think that only three such cowardly coyotes would dare attack a man, even if it was in the dark. Ah!"

He had caught sight of Mr. Stafford and his ragged squire. The exclamation did not seem to be one of either surprise or fear, though his hand went back to his hip like lightning.

"Go slow, Pony! Betcher yer life we don't b'long ter that gang. Finish 'em up w'ile yer got yer hand in, an' then talk ter us. We'll be hyer, standin' in ther background. I jedge yer don't want us ter take a hand in s'long ez you hev a clear lead, well down ther home-stretch. Go in!"

"It's you, Rufe, is it? I know you do not train with this gang; and the man with you seems to be a stranger. I think the thing is all over but the shouting, though it may be as well to take a look at the handiwork. It was mostly done in the dark, and a person can't always be sure how hard he lays them when he is hitting by guess-work. Nothing fatal I believe, though I thought I heard a bone or two crack."

Without further attention to the two non-combatants the young man began to examine the three on the ground.

The first of the ruffians who had been downed was still insensible, but there was nothing more the matter with him than a heavy hit on the side of the jaw.

The second had both hands clasped over the spot known in ring parlance as the "mark," and from the way he was gasping for breath, and doubling himself up, there was little danger he would attempt any mischief for some time to come.

The third was groaning on the ground, with his arm doubled under him, just as he had fallen. It was his bone which gave the crack Pony heard.

The blue-light was beginning to die away, but all had been seen that was necessary.

"Now then, gentlemen, if you have any business with me speak up quick. These hounds are disposed of, and unless there is a reason for it I do not propose to linger; I am behind time as it is."

There was something aggressive about the tone, but Primrose did not appear to notice.

"Not with you, Pony; but all ther same we are on ther way ter that leetle cottage ov yourn, an' I had the hardest kind of work ter keep this gent hyer from chippin' in when he heard 'em settin' up the game ter lay yer out. Mr. Stafford, Mr. Taylor. You kin tell him w'ot yer wants to. Like ez not he'll know as much ez the old lady, an' may save time an' shoe-leather ter come right down ter biz."

"Glad to have met you, but Primrose certainly does not believe all he has said. This is not the place for anything like confidential discourse. It was your mother with whom I desired to speak, though you may do as well. If I cannot see her, will you not allow me a few moments of your time, either at your home, or at my room?"

"I don't understand your parables, but I am not a hard man to speak with when the right time for doing it is picked out. Just now, I have something else to attend to, and my mother cannot be seen. How would to-morrow morning suit you? I can give you half a day, then, and we can meet wherever you say."

Mr. Stafford had been making good use of the light, looking over the young man with a keenness he must have felt, though he did not show it.

The fact was, Mr. Stafford had met with a surprise when he came to study this young man. From what Primrose had let fall, and from the way in which he had handled the three men, it was natural to suppose Pony Taylor was something of a desperado in his looks.

Instead, he was a mild-faced young gentleman, whose age had scarcely reached the close of its first quarter of a century, and the experiences of life at its worst, which he must have had, had left no traces on his open countenance.

"To-morrow morning let it be, then," replied Stafford, assenting in a prompt, business-like way. "As I am in haste to finish up the business which brought me to this country, and am not at all certain you can do me any good, I would take it as a favor if you would call upon me early."

"I shall be there shortly after breakfast. Come, Helen! The way is clear, and we must hurry now, to make up for the lost time."

The last words were addressed to some one in the background, whom Stafford had not as yet seen, and whose existence he had not guessed. He gave a start of surprise when a young lady, well-dressed, came gliding toward them.

"Disgusting that we must meet with such interruptions," she murmured, as her hand dropped upon Pony Taylor's arm. "I suppose the bites are past doing any more damage for the present. I am not sure but what you would have been justified in looking out for the future. Such an attack must have meant murder."

Lewis Stafford was more surprised than ever. The lady had a veil over her face, and a cloak around her figure, but he thought he could tell something about her by voice and gait. He knew she was young, well educated, and that the late affray had not affected her nerves in the least.

Who was she? What sort of a person could she be?

The two had paid no more attention to him, but swept on with hasty though by no means ungraceful steps, and there was no opportunity to obtain more than the passing glance. At that instant the light died away altogether, and Primrose gave a gentle tug.

"Don't think thar's ary harm left in them kids, but this hyer ain't ther sweetest place in ther world for a gent like you ter be loafin', unless there's a payin' game in sight. We better sashay to'rads town, an' you kin be axin' ques'huns ez we go along. I know ye'r 'most bu'stin' with 'em."

"Move off as quickly as you like, for I am going, anybo'. You had me prepared for the young man; but you did not say a word about the young lady. Who is she, and what was she doing here?"

"Opened yer eyes, did it? Got a cent'rest in ther damsel right on sight. Knowed yer would; but, yer wants ter go slow on it. She's a pre-cool'ar bit ov calico, an' deals faro 'round at Ante Abe's. Mebbe you'd like ter call thar ter-night, an' hev another glimpse?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LADY AT ANTE ABE'S.

"WHY did you not give me a hint of it?" asked the railroad magnate.

It was hard to see how it could have done any good to have known beforehand that there was a likelihood of meeting the young lady, but somehow Stafford felt as though he had been defrauded.

"It's ther fault ov some men ter tell too much," answered Rufe, who had dropped back a pace, so that he covered Stafford from the rear. "Frum w'ot you said I didn't think she could be your game. Don't do ter mix biz an' pleasure. Better git yer work did up fu'st ways, an' then go flirtin' round ef yer hev to. But yer wants ter keep all two eyes open fur Pony. He's peccoliar; an' a bad leetle boy on w'eels w'en he gits ter goin'."

"I should think so. And what might his peculiar line of business be? He hardly looks to be what your words might indicate."

"In this hyar country looks don't 'mount ter much. Ef they did yer mou't be 'way off on sich a man ez me. Wait tell yer sees him with a fist full ov keyards, an' a man with nerve an' a wallet on ther other side ov ther table. You kin tell in a minnit he's a jim-dandy from up ther krick."

"An' ef yer see him bossin' ther men 'round in the Elephunt Lode, er layin' out a gang w'ot's tryin' ter run ther town, yer mou't think he war some 'un else."

"An' ef yer wants ter hear ther dead laugidges spoke as they wos spoke afore ther flood, jest w'ing in one ov these hyer collidge professors w'ot goes snookin' 'round ter try ter beat common sense with skientifick foolishness, an' you kin hear a heap sight more ner Julius Caesar could 'a' understood."

Primrose rattled on with an evident desire to excite Stafford's interest in the young man, and make him forget the scene he had left behind.

He was not altogether successful, however.

Somewhat to his surprise Stafford broke out in a new place.

"Did you notice the three men by whom he was attacked?"

"Can't say that I did. They war down, er mostly so, an' it war his circus, none of our biz."

"I may have been mistaken, then, but it seemed to me one of them was the fellow who led the attack upon you at the hotel, and whom you called Black Burt. If I was not mistaken he will scarcely be likely to give us much trouble. By the time that arm of his gets well enough to handle a weapon I hope to be out of the place for good."

"A keen eye yer hev, Mister Stafford. I don't guess ye'r far w'rong, an' I meant ter tell yer that same w'en we got offen ther street. It ain't no good sayin' more ner yer hev to 'bout biz when it's so dark yer can't see w'ich way yer nose pints. That war ther gang, an' you kin jedge ef this hyer Taylor an' you kin be mixed in ther same line ov noshuns."

"It is more than a coincidence. Unfortunately, it tells me something else."

"Wouldn't menshun ary more facts than are jest ov a howlin' neshasary. I kin guess ther rest. W'en we git onder kiver'll be time ernuf. Whar did yer think ov goin' now? Ante Abe's?"

"As well there as anywhere else. It may be that I can meet this young Taylor, and at least make a beginning of the business we may have to transact."

"Ante Abe's goes, then. Needn't tell yer not ter put on frills unless yer wants ter hustle fur yer breath. It's bad ernuf fur me ter try that on at sich a place."

"I should think so," smiled Stafford, giving a glance toward the ragged-looking figure he knew was at his side.

"From the specimen I have seen of his attaches I should hardly think gentlemen of your limited capital and unprepossessing appearance would be allowed to take many liberties in the house."

"Yas, but me poverty perfects me, so ter speak. No 'un thinks ov drawin' a shootin'-iron on sich game, less they've hed a sample ov me style aforehand. Fu'st along they on'y kick ther bummer out, an' that's a eend ov it. I'm all right; wish I war ez sure ov you!"

Rufus appeared to be somewhat worried about his charge.

They had reached the center of the town once more, and as it was not far to Ante Abe's he had not long to make up his mind in. Their ap-

pearance there was really the next thing in order.

"You haven't a second best suit, then, that I could don," suggested the magnate. "As I could not induce you to come up to my level, perhaps the next best thing would be for me to come down to yours. The more I think of it the more I am satisfied we do not correspond in appearance sufficiently to make our trips together as pleasant as might be possible."

"Let that go, let that go!" ejaculated the bummer, waving his hand as though the consideration was of no great account. "I don't reckon thar will be trouble thar. Ef so be it comes I'll be with yer. That's ernough. I've bin weighed in ther balances several times sence I sot down at Paddy's Flat; an' so fur ez reported I wa'n't found wantin'."

"I can believe you, and as there seems to be some especial reason, of which I know nothing, to influence your conduct, I will let you have your own way. Remember, I do not go there to have an interesting time, as you would call it. I have some faint hope of seeing the Taylors, and perhaps making their acquaintance, but I do not intend to be obtrusive."

"Ob-w'ich? I'm purty well read fur a man ov me perfesh; but them big words git ther better ov me sometimes."

"I mean that I intend to be guided by chance, and unless I see some opening to speak to brother or sister, without seeming to force an acquaintance, I wish to remain quietly in the background while I take a few notes."

"An' then?"

"Return to the hotel and obtain a little of that rest I will no doubt feel the need of so soon as the excitement of the late adventures has somewhat died away."

"An' he calls them adven'chures! Bless me soul! W'ot name will he hev fur 'em w'en su'thin' strikes him ez are really strong?"

Softly, as if to himself, did Rufus ask the question, and Mr. Stafford gave answer promptly enough:

"Never mind troubling your soul about that. No doubt, when the time arrives, I shall find the proper name for the incidents coming with it. I only want to give you to understand I do not expect to monopolize you for the entire night, and if you want to enter into what you would have me believe are your favorite diversions, a little waiting will let me out of them altogether."

"Precactly, with a large P. Hyer's Ante Abe's. In course I don't 'spect you an' me are ter go in, arm in arm. You jest saunter in ez though you were ter home, an' look round all yer wants to, so ez yer do it 'thout makin' 'em think yer are up ter some game not ter be found on Ante's tables."

"And what will you be doing?"

"Oh, I'll be frolickin' 'round som'eres nigh, ready ter bring up ther big guns ef thar seems ter be need ov 'em. Thar's only a few ez knows you an' me trains tergether, an' ov them thar's three gone ter hospital, an' ther rest don't count. Sail in, an' I'll try a stumble down ther street w'ile ye'r gittin' settled."

Stafford had decided when he once gave himself into the hands of this unlikely looking customer that he would go the whole figure, but it was a relief to know that his first appearance in the sporting society of the Flat was not to be directly in his company.

He nodded assent to the arrangement and entered the open door, while Primrose slouched slowly down the street.

From what he had seen of the outside the man of wealth had been satisfied he was going into a saloon of the more respectable class, and of a good deal higher grade than one would be likely to meet with in a place like the Flat.

Once inside and he was sure he had made no mistake.

The only doubt he felt was whether a man of Rufus Primrose's appearance would be allowed to enter.

Certainly, there was no man in the room who had apparently descended as low down in the scale of life, and the worst looking faces he saw there belonged to the men who were acting the most quietly.

The first room—for there were three belonging to the public part of the establishment—was large and well filled, but the utmost decorum, at least, for a drinking saloon, was being observed.

The bar was being well patronized, but there was no loud swearing, or boisterous proclamation of chieftainship, on the part of the men who made their visits, took their "poison," and then retired to make way for others.

"Not a bad sort of a man, considering his position," was the commentary of Stafford, as he looked around him.

"Perhaps, though, it has to be so, in order to retain the services of his dealer. And in a place like this she could be of sufficient profit to him to justify him in laying down the law, and keeping to the letter of it. I suppose one must sacrifice to Bacchus before taking a view of the goddess of chance."

Unobtrusively, but without any show of timidity, the capitalist edged his way to the bar.

"Anything for you, sir?" asked the nearest

barkeeper—there were two of them, pretty busy—turning to him with a smile of welcome.

"A little of the best," was the answer; "and, as no one appears to be lying in wait I suppose I may be allowed to drink alone?"

The only answer was a smile, as the bartender placed the tumbler, and long, black bottle upon the counter.

Mr. Stafford had a fair idea of how to conduct himself in such places, and without being a drinking man could swallow his portion on occasion. He made no wry face, nor slighting remark.

The liquor was better than he had expected, even if it was not up to the grade to which he was accustomed. He drank with a slight nod, and then passed on.

The second room was not as large, but it was better furnished, and one end was well filled with men who were no doubt meaning business, from the way in which they were ranged alongside of the table, two and three deep. The game had already opened.

Stafford looked curiously at the dealer.

He recognized the woman at once, and as he looked through a fortunate lane the eyes of the feminine dealer met his directly. It might be that he was mistaken, but Stafford was almost sure that even in that fleeting glance the young lady had recognized him.

CHAPTER IX.

A STREAK OF BLIND LUCK.

"THERE must be something of intuition about it," thought Stafford. "I have her position to aid me, or I might have passed her by without notice; but how does it come she can locate me? I stood in the background when she made her appearance after the assault, and there was scarcely light enough left to cast a shadow. It may be it is because I am a stranger, though strangers should not be such a rarity in a town like this. I must watch and see if she looks my way again."

This was easier thought than done.

The game was not what might be called a heavy one, though there were two or three steady-paced gamblers at the table, who were apt to push the limit when they thought they had struck a vein.

For the most part, however, those standing around the table were just keeping the game moving.

Some were probably waiting to see how the cat was going to hop, while others were more interested in the dealer than the cards, if looks went for anything.

At the same time those looks were discreetly given. Ante Abe was always ready to protect his fair dealer from an admiration so open as to be unpleasant; and generally Pony Taylor was not far away.

When Miss Helen opened the game for the first time at the house, there were a few boisterous ones, who required sitting down on. Since that there had been no occasion for any interference—as much through respect and admiration for the little lady, as through fear of her masculine protectors.

Mr. Stafford was not an old man, but he had supposed he was past the period of foolishness which belongs to youth, and was impervious to the witcheries of a siren.

Nevertheless, that glance had its effect. He ascribed it to curiosity; but just as likely it was something more. Miss Helen, so far as looks went, was a young lady for whom some men might be willing to die. The man of wealth desired a closer glance; and it seemed to him there was but one way to get it.

He invested twenty-five dollars in checks, and edged his way in through the players.

Of course there was some danger of stepping on somebody's toes, so he moved cautiously, his checks in his hand; and at last obtained a position more favorable than he had expected.

Very quietly he put down a dollar on the ace, and then glanced up at the dealer to see if she had noticed his bet.

That was the apparent meaning of the look, but he had something more in view, fleeting though it was.

He had taken in every feature at one instantaneous stare, and now was considering them all at his leisure, while he seemed to be absorbed in contemplation of the cards as they came one by one from the silver box she held in her hand.

"Good heavens!" he was thinking, "how strangely familiar, and yet how unlike to everything I have ever seen! Surely, I would know where to place that face if I had ever seen it before."

Probably there were a dozen other men in the room who had made practically the same mental observation. She looked like some one each had seen, yet not one of them could say who that some one could be. She was entirely too handsome to resemble any one.

If anything, she was under the medium size. At first glance one might be pardoned for thinking she was smaller than the average woman. The delicacy of her features was well calculated to cause that impression.

She wore a broad-brimmed white hat, slanted to one side of her head, and so exposing at least half of one side of a luxuriant head of hair,

which glittered like burnished gold when the light fell full upon it, and had a dull red glow when viewed more in the shadow.

Her fur-lined cloak had dropped away from one shoulder, leaving her right arm free, and exposed above the elbow, for the velvet dress she wore had short sleeves, and a close-fitting basque.

How she had preserved her perfect complexion had been a mystery to more than one of the gentler sex who had caught glimpses of it by daylight, as she passed demurely along the street which led to the post-office, and Mr. Stafford fell to wondering about the mystery now.

And he also found time to steal another glance, to satisfy himself whether those dark eyes which had turned their somewhat gloomy depths so fully upon him, were really blue of the deepest shade, or whether Miss Helen was of that rarest type, a black-eyed blonde.

By that light, and at the distance of the table away, he could not decide, and when he looked up again Miss Helen was saying:

"Ace wins."

The winning or the losing of his stake was a matter of no interest whatever to Stafford; but having once dipped into the game he was bound to play it out, until there was a natural termination, which he supposed would come with the loss of the twenty-five with which he had started.

Silently he placed the second check on the ace, and added three more from the stock in his hand. He was actually beginning to be ashamed of the smallness of his first venture.

The pause was brief, while the players hurriedly made their bets. The cards came once more mechanically from the box.

"Ace wins."

Lewis Stafford, the millionaire, who had not seen a card played for half a dozen years, had won six dollars. His success would hardly make him lose his head.

Hastily he shoved everything over to the king and added to it the stock of checks in his hand. He had obtained all he had come to the table for, and did not believe if he played an hour he would secure any desirable information. Unless the brother put in an appearance he would sooner be somewhere else.

He had not calculated on the freaks fortune will sometimes play to the advantage of her disdainful wooers.

Along came the king on the side of the players, and his original capital had more than doubled.

Stafford began to take a trifle more interest in the game.

"There is nothing more discouraging than to have luck stick to you, whether you want it or not. If this thing keeps on I will have to call for Rufus to play my hand out," thought he, as he put everything on the ace.

"I wonder if that would not create a sensation."

For some little time he watched dubiously the run of the cards. He did not care to win, and yet the gambling spirit within him was waking up. Twenty-five dollars was a bagatelle, to be sure; but if this thing kept on there was no telling where it might end. Dame Fortune does have her vagaries, sometimes, as Mr. Stafford very well knew.

Certain as fate came the cry:

"Ace wins!"

By this time there was beginning to be an outside interest in his game. When a man parodies his cards, and wins straight along for half a dozen turns there will be bystanders enough to notice it, and take an interest in what is to follow.

There was one more ace in the box, and as the card had won three times in the deal it did not seem likely to win the fourth. Once more he played the ace to win, for all the chips he was worth.

The dealer gave a quick glance at the stack of checks, let her gaze run along to the looker out, and then pulled the cards, while Stafford heard in a whisper behind him:

"Why'n thunder didn't yer copper ther ace? She can't win four times, straight along."

Very little difference did it make to Mr. Stafford whether the ace won or not. If he had a choice, indeed, he would rather have had it lose, though he was beginning to have a vague curiosity as to what he could make out of this thing.

He had not long to wait to know the fate of his last venture.

For two turns the bank won from other individuals. Then along came the ace on the side of the players.

Of course the false prophet of the thick whisper had been Primrose. He was edging his way through the players with a discretion hardly to be expected, and when, as Mr. Stafford drew in his winnings and looked over the board with a glance of uncertainty, he reached his back, he had a changed tune.

"Never knowed it ter fail. Them ez don't need it kin hev a streak ov hog luck, an' then won't know w'ot ter do with it. Say, this thing runs wide open. Crowd 'em fur all ye'r w'ith. Ef yer bu'sts ther bank yer gits a pile. Five thousand are ther bank ter-nite, an' ef Abe sez ther word he kin double that an' I'll go his

s'curity ter cash his notes w'en Bainbridge opens in ther mornin'."

The stack of checks began to be something of a white elephant.

The financier knew he could hardly help attracting attention to himself if he kept on after this fashion, yet he did not know how to stop.

"I am in the swim," he thought to himself. "I was a bigger fool than I thought when I began, but I suppose there is nothing to do but play it out to the end. It is not very likely I can keep on winning all the time, and a single turn can help me out of the dilemma. To make it sure I will stick to the king and ace, with the ace for preference."

If the game was anything but a square one such a decision would have suited the dealer exactly; and as if to proclaim it he drew his checks to him, and watched the game go by with a carelessness not at all assumed.

With neither ace nor king in the box there was nothing for him to do but wait for the next deal.

As Mr. Stafford's luck became more pronounced that of the other players waned, so that the bank was not as yet a loser; and when the full pack was again placed within the box, there was no anxiety on the face of the dealer as she looked around, waiting for the bets to be made.

Without hesitation the man of railroads shoved his capital toward the ace.

"F I war you I'd put a copper on an' play it ter lose," came in a guarded whisper from the mentor at his back.

The situation began to be provoking.

Stafford did not lose his temper, but he was tired. His right hand was in a side-pocket of his coat, and at this second interruption came up, coat and all, till something hard touched Rufus on the breast.

At the same time the tramp heard a low click, which told him the hammer of the hidden pistol had gone back. Mr. Stafford never looked that way or opened his lips, but he was talking to his guardian quite loudly.

"Kayrect, ez usu'l. I don't know a blame thing, an' ain't got a word ter say," muttered Primrose, carefully backing away.

"I take ther hint an' re-tire. It's a squar' game, an' ef he's ter win, w'ot's ther differ'n's how he bets. I mou't hoodoo his luck, but I ain't smart ernuf ter give him a p'inter."

For the fifth time hand-running the ace won, and Stafford, notwithstanding his modest beginning, was already over a hundred dollars to the good.

Without knowing why, he changed this time from the ace to the king, and saw the reason a moment later. The ace lost, and the king won.

After that there is no use to follow him in detail. Silently but carelessly he made his bets; and without the least visible elation drew in his winnings, to shove them over to the other card, for through the rest of the deal, and the next, he chopped about from ace to king, and back again.

Such a run of luck had positively never been heard of before in the place.

The greater part of the players drew out and watched, waiting for the collapse which did not come.

One or two tried to follow his luck in a mild sort of way.

One or two had the courage to copper his game; but it was only in a half-hearted manner, after all, since it began to be recognized he had hit a streak, and there was no telling how far it would carry him.

And so the game went on without a single break in the good fortune which had surprised the stranger, until at last, as the ace came up on the wrong side for the bank, Miss Helen turned the box face downward, and pushed her chair back from the table.

At that there was a loud cheer from the lips of the majority of the spectators. A moment later, from the bar-room there came the rush of many feet.

"Brace yerself," whispered Primrose, again at his employer's shoulder. "Thar's su'thin' wrong a-brewin', an' we'll all hev ter j'ine ther army."

CHAPTER X.

THE CYCLONE AT PADDY'S FLAT.

THE interest excited by the strangely lucky game Mr. Stafford was playing had kept every one in the room to their places.

A piece of intelligence which reached the outer room about the time the "streak" fairly developed, had kept every one else from coming in.

Ante Abe's was headquarters for the dissemination of news. If there was anything to be told it reached there before it had been oftentimes repeated.

"Hyer's ther latest frum Captain Columbo!" exclaimed a man darting into the bar-room, evidently in a high state of excitement. "He's corraled that gal ov Bainbridge's, an' wants twenty thousand er he'll chop off her head! It's time Paddy's Flat got a move on, an' did su'thin'."

Instantly the man was a center of attraction

for every one within the sound of his voice. Half a dozen, surrounding him from all sides, reached for his coat collar, and he was in danger of being pulled apart in the anxiety which each man displayed to have him to himself long enough for a special statement of the news in all its minutia.

"What's that? What's that?" rose in every direction.

"Git him up on a table an' let him say it over ag'in so we kin all hear it!" added one, who was among the rearward ranks and not exactly sure of his hearing.

A shout greeted the proposition, and as everybody recognized the fact that no one would be allowed an exclusive right, the half dozen nearest joined together to act on the suggestion. Before he well knew what they were about, the news-bearer was thrown on a convenient table, while on all sides went up the cry:

"Say it over again, and say it loud!"

"I sed Bainbridge's da'rter hed bin took in by Captain Columbo, an' he's sent word ter ther old man that ef he didn't fork over twenty-thousand he'll send in her head in a basket. It's a true bill; and ther wu'st ov it are thet ther old man isn't hver."

"Look out, Tim Lane! You sure what you're saying?" asked Ante Abe, himself, striding out from behind the bar.

"You bet I'm sure. When the letter come it war marked important, an' Lizer Jane, ther gal that does ther cookin', took a look at it, seein' it warn't sealed.

"Ther racket that gal made war jest amazin', an' betwixt ther tellin' ther hull post-office when she run in thar bareheaded, an' shoutin' fur 'em to go look fur young Mister Tom, an' howlin' 's'uthin' 'bout the Black Doves, it war orful. I thort yer should know what war goin' on, so I lit out ter bring the news. I dunno if young Tom kin do ary thing er not, but ef he don't we or't ter, an' hyer's one ter say it's a dog-goned shame thet Paddy's Flat don't wipe out sich a black-faced scoundrel ez Columbo. I'm one ter take a try at it. Le's raise a army!"

"Who knows where Tom Bainbridge is?" asked Abe, looking around.

The young man occasionally dropped in at the saloon, but it was not a recognized place to find him.

"Who is that you want to find?" asked a newcomer, who had been attracted from the street as he was sauntering past the open door.

"Tom Bainbridge himself, by all that is holy!"

Ante Abe sprung forward as he spoke, at the same time raising his hand in a warning gesture.

There was good reason for making but little delay, and yet Abe wanted to break the intelligence as tenderly as possible.

"Brace yourself, and get ready for a bit of bad news, if you have not already heard it, as I suppose you have not. There may not be anything in it, after all; and if there is it will all come out right, if we keep our heads clear."

"What is the trouble now?" asked young Bainbridge, staring at Abe, and evidently uncertain whether this was jest or earnest. Nothing has happened to the old gentleman, has there?"

"Nothing that we know of; but—when were you at home?"

"Not since morning. I have been adding up figures over at the bank. No more nonsense, now. Tell me the whole thing, off-hand, and quick. I'm starting for home in ten seconds by the watch."

In very few words Ante Abe told the young man all that he knew.

Tom listened attentively, though as the brief narrative progressed a smile of unbelief came to his lips.

"See here, there must be some mistake about that. It might have been possible for the Black Doves to have got hold of father, for he went over to the Gulch this afternoon, and is not back yet, so far as I know. But I can't see how they could have reached Alta. They would hardly try to take her out of the house in broad daylight. I'll go over at once, however, and find out the rights of the story."

For a moment it looked as though the young man was going to have an escort more numerous than select.

Every one was interested in the story, and nearly every one thought of going along.

"If you please, gentlemen," interposed Bainbridge, not too much excited to see what was on the carpet.

"I am thankful for your good intentions, but in case there is no foundation for this rumor, which I firmly believe to be the case, it would perhaps frighten the household if such an irruption took place. Wait patiently for a few moments. I promise I will return and let you know the truth."

"And if it is so you know you can rely on the Flat to stand by you. If you are going to fight you can have all the men you want for the asking; and if the loan of all the spare cash in the house will help you out till the old gentleman gets back, say the word and it can be had."

"Thanks, Abel. I know we can rely on the Flat to stick by us; but I hope there will be no

necessity to make an appeal. So-long! I'll see you all shortly."

Bainbridge hurried away, and no one followed him. A few of the nervous ones went out shortly after, and several walked some little distance down the street, but they did not go far, and soon drifted back to the saloon.

Before the young man had time to return there was fresh fuel added to the excitement. Another man came in, full of the news. He had even a more circumstantial story to tell than the first, and there was no longer any doubt about the truth of the matter.

It may have been that the men at Ante Abe's were not of the class out of which Sunday-school superintendents are made, and a good many of them had doubtless done things pretty irregular; yet, at the same time, there was no question about the genuineness of the indignation expressed on all sides.

The elder Bainbridge was one of the solid citizens of the place, Tom a popular young man, and Miss Alta a handsome enough young lady to swear by.

And the men who were there were just the kind to do something when once fairly excited. It would have done Lewis Stafford's soul good if he had heard the threats and propositions which were floating around.

"It won't do, gentlemen, it won't do, to let this sort of thing go on any further," announced Ante Abe; and when he spoke at large his voice was generally heard all over the room.

"This gang is getting altogether too big for its britches, and while we are taking it down a peg or two we may as well be putting it out of the road altogether. If we don't, some day, or night, they will be sacking the town."

"You don't think they would dare to try that thing on?" was the anxious question asked by some one.

"That's just what. They do say it's a game Columbo tried on, the other side of the mountain; and made big money out of it, too. That's how he came to skip out there, and come over here."

"Thought that was Ready Rank. Captain Columbo ain't that kind, worse luck. If he would come down on the town we would have him just where we want him. As long as he sticks to the mountains, and just makes a dive out, now and then, for a few treasure-boxes, or what he can scoop up from a lot of tenderfeet, who haven't the sabbe to stand him off, he has a safe enough thing of it. We might try to chase him for a year, and we wouldn't get sight of a trail, even. But if he comes here we'd have him, you bet!"

"Or he would have us. It's not often there are a dozen men together with Winchesters on their shoulders, and all ready to have a shooting-match. Why, if he was to come in here, right now—"

Ante Abe brought his remarks to a close.

More could have been said, but it was not necessary. As though his words had summoned them, there was a confused clatter of horses' hoofs outside, and almost before the noise was noticed there was an invasion which made every man there think that Captain Columbo had come.

Through the wide doorway came a troop of men, who once within the house began a whooping and a yelling fit to take the roof off, while there was a rattling of fire-arms to make the din a pandemonium.

"Here he is now!" exclaimed more than one; a few who had the chance tumbled out of the windows; those who were convenient to the door retreated to the other rooms; and Ante Abe, the coolest man there, sprung over the bar, and took his place behind the counter.

He did not believe this was Captain Columbo and his Black Doves, though he had an idea it was 'most as bad.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. STAFFORD PASSES OUT.

MR. STAFFORD had just time to cash in his chips, a duty which he had not neglected. Now that the game was over he was anxious to get out of the place as soon as possible.

"What is it?" he hastily inquired of Primrose, as he tucked away his winnings, and a good deal more than startled by what he heard and saw.

"Dunno. Rustlers, I reckon. You wants ter sing mighty low tell yer gits outen ther woods, fur ef they don't take yer in thar's lots hyer ez would be glad ter hev ther chance on the'r own 'count. Ef it's ther bar they're after I guess we may git out with a hull skin; but ef it's ther bank they want ter tap, ther Lawd help us!"

There was just a moment of suspense.

The men of the Flat were in confusion, and no time to decide on anything like concerted action. A few were thinking about fighting on their own hook, but more were trying to get out of the house without waiting to see what was to follow.

Then, through the doorway followed a large share of the invaders, still shooting and yelling, while from the windows came other shots and yells which showed there were more of the gang outside.

And they were shooting with a purpose, as Stafford easily understood when the place was suddenly plunged in darkness.

Ragged Rufe was faithful to his charge.

"They got a guard at ther outside, an' you can't git away onless you fights fur it; but barrin' stray shots I don't guess they mean murder. It's ther bank they're after."

It came into Stafford's mind that he was the bank for all practical purposes, and he was rather glad the lights were out, so that no cowardly or officious person could point him out as the man who had anticipated them. There could be no retreat, and he did not think there would be long to wait until the worst was over. It was well to provide for contingencies.

"Here, take this stuff!" he whispered, and in to the hands of Primrose he thrust his winnings.

In the midst of the darkness and confusion arose a woman's voice.

The tones were indignant but firm, and Stafford recognized them as belonging to the dealer.

"Hands off, or—"

Then it seemed as though a hand had been clapped upon her mouth, for she said no more, and the noise around was too great to distinguish the sounds of any struggle.

The situation was better understood by the men of the Flat than by Lewis Stafford.

The latter was almost a stranger to such scenes, and he had never considered what should be his proper line of action when cornered in such a manner. He had a combative nature, even if it had not been developed by exercise; and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to fight.

The men of the Flat were willing enough to fight when there was an even chance, but just now they had no chance at all.

Of course they were armed; but not after the fashion of the rustlers, outlaws, or whatever these strangers might be.

But the trouble was, they could see nothing to shoot at after the intentions of the attacking party were once fully developed; and chance shots were likely, two to one, to bring down some of their friends. Meantime, it was probable the rustlers would not attempt any wholesale killing, but would just fire around loosely to cause confusion, and if they succeeded in grabbing the funds of the bank would beat a retreat.

And then was the time Ante Abe's patrons hoped to get in their work.

The exclamation of Helen Taylor was heard, but it made no great difference to the majority of the men there.

Even outlaws would not be apt to deliberately harm a woman; and it was natural enough that she should temporarily drop into their hands while they were searching for the coin.

Mr. Stafford thought differently. He had taken a deeper interest in the handsome dealer than he knew, and when he heard her smothered exclamation, he believed she was in some especial danger. Without stopping to think there were others there who could give much more effective aid, he drove recklessly through the crowd, which opened to his touch.

It did not take many steps to bring him to where the young lady had been when the lights went out, but the chair over which he stumbled was vacant.

He had no settled plan, but as he heard a sound a little beyond, which appeared to be a smothered effort at a cry, he followed on in that direction, just as several men came plunging past him. A box in the hand of one of these men struck him sharply in the shoulder, though he scarcely noticed it in his excitement.

The fact was, Miss Helen had been seized by two men, one of whom had thrust a hand roughly over her mouth. If he had been a moment sooner, Stafford would have followed the guiding hand of Primrose, who had sought to draw him away toward a corner of the room.

The girl struggled, after that, silently, but with a vigor her captors had hardly expected. She knew there was something more than a game for Ante Abe's wealth, since she was being dragged toward the further side of the room, where was a door which led out to the rear of the building.

This door was usually locked and bolted, but Helen thought of it, as she was being forced along, and felt sure it was her freedom for which she was struggling.

At the very threshold she managed to slip one arm loose.

At once her hand darted to a hidden pocket in her dress. She carried a small-sized revolver there, and knew as well how to fire it from her pocket, as though Billy Divine had taught her.

The instant her thumb had drawn the hammer back she pulled the trigger, the muzzle of the weapon resting against the side of the nearest of her captors, with only the folds of her dress between.

The bullet was hardly heavy enough to stun, but the man staggered back with a cry, loosening his hold and clapping his hand to the wound.

Then Miss Helen swung the pistol from her pocket, and fired again at the man on the other side.

This time she failed to hit, but the flash which lit up the scene showed Lewis Stafford where she was, and that two or three men were darting

upon her. He gave a great spring; but at the moment the girl was whirled out through the now open door.

Stafford and two or three men went out at the same time. In the darkness of the room he could not be distinguished from those who were making the attack.

The door shut behind them, and there was a man inside guarding it. Hardly had he closed it when some one from beside the table muttered:

"Show a light here, one of you! Our man has got away, and blest if I can find him in the dark."

"Blame ef I kin find him myself," thought Primrose, waiting in some anxiety.

He was pretty sure he knew who was meant, and wondered where Stafford had dropped to.

When the light came back the men could not find Mr. Stafford either. There were half a dozen of them, with masks on the upper part of their faces. Their rifles were slung over their shoulders, but each man held a heavy revolver at a ready, and glared around, ready to shoot at the first suspicious movement seen.

All passed with a rapidity not to be conceived by one thinking only of the time it takes to describe the situation. Stafford was a man to be recognized at a glance.

"He's not here!" exclaimed the same man who had already spoken. "He's skipped past some of you, and I'll know how it was done, later on. Outside all, and shoot him on sight if it's the best you can do!"

A more thorough search might have been made had it not been for the tumult which arose on the street.

Pistol-shots and shouts told the trouble had begun out there.

Mr. Stafford had all the chance to get away he could have asked for when he darted through the already closing door. He came with the gang, and all were too much interested in the struggling woman to pay much attention to him. He might have slipped along the wall for a few steps, when he would have been in the shadow of a shed, and his line of retreat would have been open.

Instead of that he kept on with the crowd. Now that he had come into the street he could see what was going on, although by the wall the darkness was almost as dense as in the room he had left.

Just outside of this line of shadow he could see a number of horses, some of them with men upon their backs.

Toward these Helen Taylor was being carried, the revolver having been wrenched from her hand before she could fire a third shot.

One of the horsemen bent low and held out his arms.

"Don't fool yourself, old man; she fights like a wildcat. I guess we drew the longest of her claws, but if you don't look sharp she'll leave her marks across your face. You want to get a good grip, and then hold on for all you're worth. Here she is!"

The speaker laughed as he helped swing the girl up. He was accustomed to scenes of excitement and bloodshed, so that he could enjoy a joke whenever he met one, no matter what the surroundings.

"Quit your nonsense, and hand her here!" responded the other, sternly. "By the sound of things I should judge there was enough else for you to attend to. I can take care of her without any advice from you."

"Glad to hear it, because that lets me out. I have done my share, and if you don't want any help I'll go back and see what is the racket now."

He went back; but not in the way he had intended. Mr. Stafford had been waiting until he could get a fair view of the outlook. Now, he came with a rush.

Straight out from the shoulder did he strike, and though he was a man who, for the greater part of his life, had lived by head-work, he knew just how the thing ought to be done. In his early days he had been a number one amateur sparrer, and the knowledge then gained had never left him.

Down went the man, without the ghost of an idea as to what had hit him, and Stafford, springing past, made a clutch at the waist of the young woman, who hung at the side of the horse, her wrists clasped by the horseman who had so confidently boasted of his ability to take care of her, and who was doing his best to make his word good.

The arm of the magnate closed about the supple waist, and his disengaged hand was thrown up to fire the little weapon which had excited the risibilities of Billy Divine.

The gripe on Helen's wrists relaxed, and she dropped to the ground while Stafford wheeled to face what he had been leaving behind him.

Helen Taylor was just as cool; and a little more fertile in expedients. She slid away from Stafford's arm, caught by the foot the man who was already reeling, and canted him out of the saddle.

Without any apparent exertion she swung herself into his place, and gave rein to the fretting horse:

"Save yourself!" she shouted as she went,

and as Stafford turned at the movement and the cry, he was stricken down from behind, and saw nothing more of the affray.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WOMAN WITH THE POKER.

THE flight of Helen Taylor was so instinctively made she had not time to think it was also a desertion. She knew who it was came to her aid, and had no idea he was wanted for any other reason than his interference on her behalf. It seemed likely to her that if she broke away, all eyes might be turned toward her, and thus allow him a better chance to get out of the affair without harm; but that was not the reason for her unexpected flight.

She was simply saving herself by the first means at hand.

Fortune was in her favor, and she aided it as well as she knew how.

Bending low down, and slapping the horse sharply with her open hand, she flitted out from the little group without, at first, being seen.

It was the most natural thing in the world the animal should break away when his rider fell; and the fall of the outlaw was accounted for by the pistol-shot of an instant before.

Had it not been for the value of the horse, and the fact that he might be wanted before everything was over, she might even have gotten away unnoticed by those who were in condition to pursue.

But a horse is a horse, and this one was a good one. Before half a dozen strides had been taken there was a man in pursuit, and it was not long before he saw the clinging girl. Almost at the same instant a cry arose behind, from the street, which might have warned him.

The fellow shook his horse together for the chase, and dug his spurs in deeply, as he saw that in the first few bounds he gained no ground. He had the chase pretty much to himself, and he knew its importance.

"Hold up thar!" he shouted, drawing a bead as well as he could on the horse in front of him.

"Pull in er I'll hev ter down him, an' you may git hurt. We don't want ter do yer no harm, but can't take no chances."

Helen had no point of refuge in view. There was no place at present where she would be safe. When the men of the flat had time to rally they would no doubt be able to stand the invaders off, but after the way in which she had been taken out of Ante Abe's it was not likely she would fare any better elsewhere if the raiders kept on her trail.

The only plan was to drop off somewhere and hide in the darkness until the danger was over. The going of these men would be apt to be as sudden as their coming; though she knew of cases where such people had held a town for days, and then departed at their leisure.

The hail of the man made her certain she had slender chance of succeeding. He was close upon her track, and if he fired at such short range there was little doubt but that he would bring down the horse, and her with it.

"Better to take a jump than a tumble," she thought to herself, and had an answer ready to suit the emergency.

"Don't fire then!" she called back.

"I will pull him in as soon as I can. I give it up."

She actually did take a sharp pull, at which the pace of the horse slackened visibly.

The fellow behind did not moderate his speed. He thought the sooner he had the bridle of the leading animal in his hand the better it would be. He gave a shout and a touch of the spur, and hastened on. Without noticing how Helen had dropped one hand on the horn of the saddle, and rested the other on the horse's shoulder.

Certainly, it was not the first time she had tried the feat. Keeping her wits all about her she dropped lightly to the ground, for a few strides retaining her hold on the saddle.

Then, she darted to one side, and vanished from the sight of the astonished outlaw.

Fortunately there was no one else near, though footsteps could be heard, rapidly approaching from the direction of the saloon. Helen had taken advantage of the ground, and darted between two houses between which there was a low fence.

The man on horseback did not care to make an attempt at following. If he had done so in all probability he would have come to grief.

He chose rather to flank the buildings, believing he would be in time to see whether she entered either of them, or went further.

But when he came to the other side, and drew up his horse, there was no one in sight, and he could hear no noise of footsteps that could have been made by her.

While he sat there, uncertain which way he should turn, several of his comrades were coming up in great haste. One was on horseback, and he was first on the ground.

He had seen that for some reason the chase had been abandoned, and that it was too late to strike it on the trail of the riderless animal.

"What yer doin', standin' 'round hyer?" he shouted, as he drew in.

"There will be something lively when the boss knows how we let her slip, an' it 'pears ter

me I would follered as fur as I could, an' ef it took me inter another State I'd jest ez soon ef I didn't get her."

"Foller nothin'! I stayed with her ez long ez I could, but ther blame sly little fox give me the slip right about hyer. She dropped offen her cayuse ez slick ez could be, an' took ter kiver."

"Whereabouts? Don't waste all night tellin' ov it. We want ter git a move on afore ther boss gits hyer er there'll be some straight shoot-in' an' a pair ov elegant lookin' corpses."

"That's what gits me. She went in betwixt them two house, an' now I dunno whether she's went inter one ov 'em, er gone on farder."

"Why didn't yer say so, sooner? She's in one ov 'em, an' we'll hev her out soon ez some ov ther boys gits hyer. An' yer wants ter be mighty keerful ov her ez well ez yer-self."

"That's what's ther matter. Blame a racket whar ther shootin' kin on'y be on one side! What yer s'pose the boss means by ther job? I can't see no money in it."

"That's a question you jest want ter ax him ter put ther ridge-board on ther evenin's performance. Why, blame my eyes! he wouldn't stop ter shoot; he'd cut yer throat on sight. Ef yer don't know better than ter think sich fool-questions, let alone ter say 'em, you better resign, at wunst."

"Tell me s'uthin' I don't know! But I'd jest ez soon do them things ez ter git ther boys hammerin' 'round hyer, an' then find out she never stopped. That's what's bitin' me now."

"Let it bite. Yer got ter say s'uthin', an' that suits ez well as anything else. Make up yer mind quick, fur hyer they all be."

Sure enough, the rustlers, or whatever the gang might be, were arriving. The first were on foot, but they were followed closely by the mounted men, and the led horses.

In front of him one of the fellows held the motionless figure of Lewis Stafford.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the leader sternly.

"There is no more time to waste here; and if the girl is off and away so much the worse for the men who let her go."

"But I reckon we got her holed hyer, an' we war j-st waitin' fur some 'un ter watch outside so she didn't slip off while we war rootin' ther house over. Pard seems ter think she went in hyer; but it won't take more ner a minnit ter rummage 'em both."

"Be quick about it, then. If there has been any trouble about the eyesight of you and your pard you will be apt to hear from me when the thing is settled. And, all of you, keep a watch for the breakers. There is no telling how soon the Flat will take the war-path. We ought to be on the way home. If we don't mean to sack the town."

He gave no further orders, but the men understood what was to be done as well as though he had told them.

Several dropped back to act as skirmishers in case there should be any need for their services; several stationed themselves so they could watch the houses from the rear; the men with the led horses moved on a trifle, so they would be out of range in case there was any firing from the houses; the rest advanced to the doors, about an equal number to each building.

Of course, every man kept a sharp lookout on his own account, for there was no telling what sort of a reception they were going to have, or how soon the neighbors might open fire.

The captain took the lead at the first house. He gave a thundering knock at the door, enough to almost break it from its hinges from the way it rattled and creaked.

Then he stepped to one side to await results. The answer might come in the shape of a shot from whoever was within.

"Go 'long wid yez!" shouted a shrill voice, which was Irish for one thing, and feminine for another.

"Av yez don't l'ave off yer dirty noise it's yer skull I'll be aftther chrackin' wid ther poker."

"None of that! We mean you no harm, but we must see who is there besides yourself. Strike a light, and open up, or we'll smoke you out before you're a minute older."

"An' wad ye say there's onny wan here wid me, an' Dennis not to home? Sure, an' av Oi do roise up it's the head av ye Oi'll be aftther break-in', ye dirty scut! Av ye put that in yer poipe an' shmoke it ye won't be so riddy talkin' about a lone woman."

"That's enough! If you crook your finger we'll cut you into mincemeat, and throw the pieces on the roof. Here we come!"

Against the door the leader flung himself, and at the same time light began to shine through the cracks, as though a lamp which had been burning dimly had been turned up to a full blaze.

The door creaked under the assault, but did not give way. The outlaw tried it again.

This time the shackly barricade went down, and so suddenly, the man went down with it.

It was a lucky accident, however.

The woman was holding the lighted lamp in her hand, and as the door opened she gave a great swing and pitch, and buried the lamp full at the men she could dimly see lurking without.

The missile knocked one man down, and then dropped without exploding, and as the outlaws bunched for a rush the wife of Dennis followed it, with the poker in her hand.

She was no mean proficient at poker play, and handled her weapon with a vigor that was not to be despised. If she had stuck to her work she might have routed the gang. But, when she had bestowed three or four thwacks on the nearest heads she lost courage, or decided that resistance to such a crowd as she discovered in front of her house was worse than useless.

With a loud cry she gave one more mighty stroke, and then casting her weapon aside, ran away.

Before any advantage could be taken of her flight there was the sound of several pistol-shots from no great distance, and one of the scouts came in in haste. As he came he shouted:

"There is a bigger gang than ours coming down the street. It's fight or pull foot, and that mighty sudden!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TROUBLE AT THE BANK.

YOUNG TOM BAINBRIDGE was thoroughly in earnest in what he said at Ante Abe's saloon. He had not been home since morning, but he was almost certain Alta was safe, and the news in regard to her being in the hands of the Black Doves all a fabrication.

Still, as it was a matter of such public importance, he hastened hom, to make assurance doubly sure.

He found the house without a single occupant. The door was open, and no one answered to his calls. This looked suspicious.

He ransacked the house, but failed to find any traces of his cousin or Miss Matilda, and was about turning to hurry back to Ante Abe's with the intelligence that the news he had heard there was only too true when Eliza Jane came flying back. She had been looking for him through the town, and some one had told her he had but lately gone home.

She had her story to tell, and the letter from Captain Columbo to produce. It took a quarter of an hour to receive and digest her news.

"But how in the name of common sense did they get them?" he asked, and he was bewildered by his own question.

"They certainly didn't come in here and carry them away; and I would not suppose they would have the courage to attempt an abduction on the streets, so early, at least, in the day."

"It was up on the mountain they got them, O'm affther thinkin'," replied Eliza Jane, who was the only other female of Irish extraction Paddy's Flat could boast of, and was the daughter of the absent Dennis.

"She an' Miss Matildy wint there this mornin', wid a bit av dinner in ther basket, an' a power av paper an' pencils. Oi thought it wor no good w'd come av it, but you wor not here, nayther wor ther owld jintle nan, so phat could Oi do? An' it wor shlap jacks an' syrrip Miss Matildy urthered for supper, an' it wor riddy they wor. Who are goin' to ate thim now? Wirra mel!"

"The infernal foolishness!" exclaimed Tom, almost as much excited as the Irish girl.

"If the old gentleman was at home it would not be so bad. Will it do to wait until he comes? I had better go back to Abe's and take counsel with the boys."

Before starting, however, he spent a few more minutes in further catechising the lady of the kitchen, and then hurried away in a state of mental excitement so great he did not note the sounds in the distance which might have told him something of importance was going on in Paddy's Flat. The rush of a body of horsemen through the streets of a town can be heard a good ways in the night, and it was singular he never noticed what at most times would have attracted his attention at once.

He had told the truth at the saloon when he said he had been working at the bank. He might have added that he intended to return there in a short time to finish up the work, which he ought to have done before leaving at all.

As he hurried along it came into his head that perhaps he had not made things as secure as he should have done; and as it was but a few steps out of his road he turned in that direction instead of proceeding at once to Ante Abe's.

The change in direction brought a change in the current of his thoughts.

He looked up and around him, with a sudden idea that things were not just as they ought to be in the town, though he had no suspicion of what was the matter.

It was just then the shooting began at and around Ante Abe's, and the sounds made him hurry his steps. He had no great interest in the riot he thought was being started, and was rather glad to be out of it. At the same time he wondered what it was all about. There were no signs of war when he left, a short time before.

While he was puzzling his brains over the question, some one caught him by the arm.

"Hist! There is something wrong here, and

we want to go slow or we may get left bad. You have your irons with you?"

"Of course. What is the matter?"

In the speaker Tom recognized Pony Taylor. The two were not particularly well acquainted, though that was not the fault of young Bainbridge. In a quiet, discreet way he was an admirer of the handsome dealer at Ante Abe's, and he would have had no objection to be on friendly terms with her brother.

"I suspect there is a raid on foot, and if so there may be a strike made at the bank."

"A raid! Good Heavens! what do you mean?"

"Just what I say. If I had not taken a notion there was something of that kind afoot I would not have been here."

"But what put the idea into your head?"

"Have you been hearing the racket down at Ante Abe's and its neighborhood?"

"Yes, and turned aside so I would not be drawn into it. But what has that to do with the bank?"

"Nothing, perhaps; but I fancy it has a great deal. A riot there would draw attention away from this locality. And here the work would be done more quietly."

"But that would mean a gang; and there are not the men in the Flat in sufficient numbers who could carry the thing through."

"These men are not of the Flat. They came on horseback, and it may be they are only after the coin Abe carries to back his bank for the night, but I hardly think they mean to stop at that."

"You saw them, then?"

"From a distance, but plainly enough to make them out. They ride like a gang of rustlers, and you know what that means. You heard of the affair at Sandy Bar?"

"I should think I did. They held the town for something like a good week."

"And may do the same here."

"Heavens! Have you any reason to believe there is danger of that?"

"It has happened in other places; and if the stake seems to be large enough to justify the risk there is no reason why it should not be tried on here. Captain Columbo and his Black Doves get this far, sometimes; and the rustlers that sacked Sandy Bar are liable to turn up anywhere. That's enough for talk; now it is time to do something, if, indeed, it is not too late. There is no use to look for help elsewhere, and I ought to be at Abe's myself. If you want me to stay with you I am there, and the sooner we get into the bank the better, if you mean to make a fight for the cash."

"Of course I do, and if you will come along it will take a battery of heavy artillery to get the doors down."

"Yes, the place was built to stand a siege. All I am afraid of is we will find them there before us."

"No danger of that. The place is as quiet as the grave, and every thing looks as it did when I left it."

"Are you sure?" asked Taylor, looking askant at the stout stone building in front of which they were halting.

There was something wrong he was almost certain, though his attention was somewhat diverted by something he had seen at the lower end of the street.

It might be a mistake; but he believed there were moving shadows there, which were silently and slowly drawing nearer.

"No, I am not sure," answered Bainbridge, after a second glance.

"And yet, it may have been my own fault. I turned the lamp down when I left, and it may have been I turned it a trifle too low, and it has gone out. I hear nothing inside. We will soon see."

"Go carefully. When men are robbing a bank they don't make a bit more noise than is necessary, even if they are rustlers. If you can get in from the rear I would advise we try it."

"Humbug! there is no one here!" exclaimed Tom, darting up the steps, the key to the door in his hands.

"There is no way in from the rear, and we are in time to stand off an army if there is to be an attack. I begin to think we had a scare for nothing."

The door was locked, as the young man had hoped to find it, and the key turned easily, as it always had done.

He held the door open for Taylor to pass in, then closed, locked and bolted it.

"Stand still a moment while I find the lamp. We must have a light for a little, while we get our bearings. After that it may be as well to go it in the dark."

There was no answer and probably he expected none. He fumbled in a vest pocket to find a match.

Just as he had drawn the match sharply above his knee, and there was a feeble glimmer of light, he felt himself beaten to the floor by a blow from behind.

The blow was a heavy one, but it did not take away his senses.

He fell with one hand outstretched, and was up on one knee in an instant, feeling for his revolver.

"You cur, you! You cowardly cur!" he gritted.

"It is you who would raid the bank, and this is the way you took to get in!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

THE warning of the scout was one not to be slighted. If the men of Paddy's Flat had got together in such force, and were advancing on the invaders there would be apt to be some pretty rough work done before the latter got away.

The little town had a reputation for grit and staying qualities when its people got started, and when they turned out *en masse* they always rendered a good account of themselves.

It seemed a little strange how such a gathering could have been made on such short notice, and with a large share of the fighting men cornered at Ante Abe's; but there was no reason to doubt the intelligence.

"Close up, there!" sung out the leader, sternly.

"There has been botch-work, and too much time wasted already. Two of you keep an eye here, and see that if the game is ready boled it does not get away. The rest of you fall in, and be ready. If this town wants fight in earnest it can have it from 'way-back."

There was a hasty mounting by those on foot, and the moment all were in the saddle there was a forward movement.

The rustlers had no idea of retreat until they had tested the courage and fighting qualities of the men who were advancing to meet them.

There was one thing the scout in his haste had forgotten to tell, or it might have made a difference in the disposition of the leader.

The coming men were as well mounted as themselves, and were advancing with twice their caution.

In the soft ground of the street the feet of the coming horses made little noise, yet before they turned around a screening house or two the leader made a discovery.

"By the holy maverick! they are mounted, boys. There will be a chance for fun and no mistake. Tumble them out if you can without too much shooting, and get away with the drove. Horseflesh is worth money, and won't be a bad thing to have plenty of till we're ready for a sale."

The word went along the line, that now spread almost entirely across the street, and then came a ringing cry from the opposing force:

"Forward! Charge!"

Under the stimulus of suddenly driven spurs the horses dashed madly forward, and the two bands hurled themselves one upon the other.

There was a difference in the way the two parties advanced.

As they heard the order from their assailants the rustlers dropped alongside of their horses until not a head was to be seen, though they came on with ear-splitting yells, and whoops that might have come from the throats of a whole tribe of Indians.

Their horses appeared to be used to the work, for they never swerved, nor tried to slacken their pace, though from the other side there came a stream of shots, that could not help but do some execution.

Here and there a horse was hit, and perhaps a rider or two grazed; but for the most part the bullets whistled high. They were meant for the raiders; and as they were crouching low they were hard to hit.

Then the horses met breast to breast, or passing one another became mixed up in a close *melee*. For a little there was confusion worse confounded.

Shots were fired at close quarters, blows were struck with knives or fists, and there were curses by the cord.

But in spite of all the danger and excitement of the joined battle at close quarters the rustlers remembered orders, and acted accordingly. If they had been fighting automata they could not have shown more disregard for danger.

Each one dashed at his man, handling his horse without rising in the saddle, or exposing himself a particle more than he had been doing.

And when they were exactly in reaching distance a hand shot out to grasp a man near the knee.

Then, a quick, powerful heave, and the man grasped was out of the saddle.

It all worked like clock-work, save in one case. The leader himself made the only failure; and he discovered the reason for it before he tried a second toss.

The man he had hold of was tied in his saddle.

"Well enough as it is," he thought as he dexterously wheeled to catch the bridle-rein of the frightened horse.

"Round up all, and away with you!" he added, at the top of his voice, as a few scattering shots were fired from a little distance, and he caught sight of a number of men on foot, running to join in the fray.

Then he threw his hand up carelessly, and fired at a man who was endeavoring to slink away.

"See what that fellow has on his back. There is more in this than we understand."

The fellow dropped to the shot, and the nearest horseman to him stooped low in his saddle and

gathered something up from the ground which had fallen from the stiffening fingers.

"Coin, captain, by the feel of the sack. Do you want to carry it?"

The man extended the sack as he spoke, and it looked as though it was no trifling weight.

"Hold on to it yourself, till we have a chance to see what is in it. You shall have your share. Now, off!"

There was no more delay. With two prisoners, and a sack of booty, the rustlers rode out of town, followed by a few scattering shots, which did no damage.

The rush of the rustlers took all of Paddy's Flat that was on the war-path directly in their wake. The men were evidently running away, and what better thing could be done than follow them? There might be a chance for a few sitting shots, and all who were tumbled over would be paid for.

This was fortunate for as dismayed a gang of men as the Flat had ever seen. The meeting with the rustlers had been a thorough surprise, and the summary way they had been handled was more than disgusting.

In spite of the words of the scout, who had reported the lot as outnumbering the band to which he belonged, there had not been enough to reach around, and of them all the only one who had been seriously harmed was the man who had carried the sack.

All had received hard tumbles, and one or two had lain in an almost senseless condition for a brief period; but they got to their feet at last, save the one who had a bullet in his side.

"Curses on it!" exclaimed the man who had given the order to charge. "Those fellows don't belong at the Flat. They ought to have been in the same boat with ourselves. Where were our eyes that we ran into such a snarl as that? Steady, now! See who is dead, or badly wounded. Then we must be getting out of this as fast as we know how."

"No one down but Jackson. He has it for keeps, I guess; and the sack he carried is missing."

A curse fell from the lips of the leader, as bitter as could well be breathed, and then he pulled himself together.

"It's a bad beat, but we can't help it now. They are off and away, and if we don't want to do some of the heaviest kind of fighting, we want to get away ourselves. Thank our lucky stars everybody will be looking at that end of town, and we will drop out at the other. If it wasn't for the diversion, we might have trouble on our hands before long. Eternal curses on the luck that should have panned out so well!"

No one else had much to say, but two or three were examining Jackson.

"He's dead as a mackerel," said one, looking up.

"No one knows him 'round hyer, an' I guess we may ez well let him lay. Thar won't be nobody kin tell which gang he come frum, an' it wouldn't make much differen's ef they did."

"Yes, let him lie. This way all! We are in for a tramp not down in the bills, and no telling what besides."

In no very good spirits the gang slunk away from town, leaving behind them one dead comrade, and carrying away no spoils.

Had the men of the flat who followed the rustlers when they began their retreat been able to overtake the fugitives they might have come off badly enough, for they were but few in number compared with the rustlers, and by no means as well armed.

Prominent in the pursuit was Rufus Primrose.

Impressed with the confidence of the man of means in placing in his hands the little fortune lately won at the table, Rufus had been doubly anxious to look after his patron's safety while taking care of the five or six thousand dollars.

He had not intended to become separated from him; but the movements of Mr. Stafford, when he went to the aid of the fair dealer, were so sudden, and so at variance with what Primrose expected, that the latter lost track of his man.

For a little while he had hopes that those, who, to him, seemed to be searching for the distinguished stranger, would be thrown off the trail altogether. When they left the room he was one of the first to dart forward to take a look through the window, and was in time to see a limp figure picked from the ground, and thrown up in front of one of the riders, just before they dashed away.

"They've got him! I knowed they had him!" he shouted excitedly, and without thinking of his own safety flung himself against the door.

He found there was no getting out that way, as it had been fastened from the outside. Back he hurried to the bar-room, where a public indignation meeting was being held.

Such a thing had never before happened to the town, and now that the ready pistols were no longer in sight every man had something to say about it except Ante Abe.

As he had been standing covered from the moment he had vaulted behind the bar in a vain attempt to grab his weapons, he had nothing to reproach himself with except that he had not had

his tools handy. And even then he would probably not have been as well off.

One man could not have managed such a crowd; and no one else seemed to have been ready to chip in.

The surprise had been too great.

"Hyer's fur one ter try fur gittin' even!" shouted Primrose, bursting into the room, a revolver in either hand.

"Mebbe we kin down a few afore they kin git outen town an' it won't show so all-fired big ag'in' us then, w'en folks are axin' how ther thing war done, in ther mornin'. Betcher they stop some's along ther road ter try some ov ther one-hoss serloons. Ef they do we kin hev a hack at 'em fur good luck. Who's with me?"

There were quite a number of recruits at once. It would cost nothing to do a little prospecting; and if the signs were not favorable there would be no need to interfere with the raiders.

Thus it happened that about the time the rival bands of invaders were locking horns some of the men of the Flat came on the scene, and did their best to take a hand in, though they did not fully understand what they saw.

Rufus Primrose got a glimpse of several prisoners, which made him a little more particular about firing at large, and as the horsemen were in the lead, and stopping for nothing, the pursuit did not last long. At the outskirts of the town even Primrose was willing to halt.

"They didn't get much coin, anyhow," said one, "shaking his fist at the dimly seen figures."

"Reckon they knew enough to git before the Flat began to hump herself."

"But they jest went ther right sorter way ter git coin by'n-by. They ain't totin' them men along fur fun er glory."

Primrose could not help throwing in the suggestion, though he had about come to the conclusion to say as little as possible about the importance of one of the prisoners. Who the other one could be was more than he could make out. Certainly, it was not Miss Helen Taylor.

"By the way," put in another, "they seemed to be having quite a sociable time in the street, but wout I want to know is, who was the other party? It don't seem to me the Flat could have turned out quite so well. Maybe they were fighting among themselves. It wouldn't be a bad scheme to go back and see if we can't get a few points. I begin to think this thing is not as near over as it looks."

The suggestion was not a bad one, and was acted on immediately, though by the time they reached the spot where the fighting had been going on there were a number of other townsmen on the scene, and the body of the luckless Jackson was being examined.

A black mask over the upper part of his face had already attracted attention, and when Primrose saw it he, at once, exclaimed:

"Dog-gone it, there's two gangs, an' one ov 'em war ther Black Doves."

CHAPTER XV.

UNCLE BEDROCK TAKES COUNSEL.

THE exclamation of Primrose cleared away something of the mystery about the fighting which had taken place, but it explained little else. As yet, it was not understood that Miss Taylor had been in any particular danger, except in so far as she was an *attachee* of the bank.

Her smothered cry had hardly been heard beyond those nearest to her, and so far her absence had not, apparently, been noted. It was the generally received opinion that the raid was made for the purpose of gobbling up the cash in Ante Abe's bank; anything else occurring was only incidental.

Rufus was in something of a quandary as to what he had better do.

When it came to leading public sentiment his looks were against him; and he was not sure it would be advisable to let on he had five thousand dollars of Lewis Stafford's money. People might think it had better be placed in more responsible hands.

Taking these things into consideration he decided he would say nothing to the crowd at large, but go and consult with Billy Divine. Between them they might be able to make out what was best to do in this alarming situation.

It was not a bad idea, because Divine knew all about his engagement by Stafford, and would be able to trust him better than any one else. If he told him now, he could show he had not been slack in looking after the interests of the missing man, when the latter should be missed, and inquiries made.

Quietly sliding away from the crowd the man of rags turned his steps toward the hotel.

He found the house closed and dark.

Divine was an old-timer, and understood such things. The attack on the saloon had hardly begun when he scented the mischief in the air, and prepared for it the best he knew how. He was by no means a coward, but had no desire to have his place wrecked.

He was a little slow about learning when the retreat had been made, so that he was just lighting a lamp when Primrose came, cautiously tapping at the door.

The match went out, and Billy maintained a discreet silence.

"Oh, you kin glimmer up ez soon ez yer chooses," suggested Primrose, through the key-hole.

"Ther gangs hez lit out, ther town all soothed down, an' it's nobody hyer but me, yer Unkel Bedrock—Rufus Primrose ter wit."

"An' Mr. Stafford? Are he with yer? I bin a-worryin' ever sence he left, an' ef I hedn't bin a-tied down hyer too tight ter rustle, I'd 'a' bin down lookin' fur him among ther boys."

"Sing low 'bout him tell you an' me hez a talk. I want ter git yer advice. He's in bad han's, an' ef they know jest how vall'yable he are they may pinch him tell he can't rest."

There was no difficulty about recognizing the tones of the speaker, and Divine, though he did not light the lamp, hurriedly shot back the bolt, and admitted the tramp.

"Better come in hyer, whar ther light can't be seen from the street," suggested the landlord as he struck a match, and gingerly led the way.

"I ain't feelin' safe yit, an' won't tell daylight comes. I kin take my share ov fun when a man kin see what he is doing; but blame this reckless shootin' 'round in ther dark!"

He lit the lamp while he was speaking, and then wheeled around sharply and faced Primrose.

There was a change in his tone, and his eyes meant business as he turned the muzzle of his revolver on the man of rags.

"An' yer lost him, did yer? You kin tell me how yer done it; an' yer wants ter tell it toler-ble straight. Ef thar's bin ary shenanagin we got you, sure."

"Shenanagin, thunder! W'ot do yer take me fur? Ain't I jest ez equal a man ez ever walked sole leather through to the uppers? An' didn't I stick to him ez long ez I could see him, an' a heap sight longer? You put up that weepin' an' talk sense. It's a blame awkward state ov affairs, an' I don't see my way through."

"Let's hear it, then. I ain't a-trustin' a man ov your style no furdur ner I kin see him, an' thar seems ter be some things ez need explainin'."

The words and manner of the landlord were by no means conciliatory, but there was no use taking affront at them. Rufus dropped into a chair with a sigh, and began at the beginning.

That is, he touched lightly on the preliminary stroll, and gave a tolerably accurate account of the game at Ante Abe's, and what followed until he had lost track of Mr. Stafford.

After that he could only give his opinions.

He was sure Stafford got outside of the building unobserved, and had then been captured and carried off. Whether it was because the raiders knew of his winnings, and expected to bag them off of his person, or whether there was some other, and more important reason, they had him a prisoner, and he did not know what was the best thing to do under the circumstances.

"It are a ticklish question, an' that's a fact," said Billy, who forgot his suspicions as he became interested in the story.

"Ef they war jest after that five thousand they may turn him loose when they find he ain't got it."

"An' ef they knowed he war wu'th a few dozzin mill'yuns they might want to soak him fur ther biggist kind ov a sheer. That's w'ot I'm a-lookin' at, an' w'ot kinder wants ter make me sing small tell I finds out fur good w'ot are ther leetle game. They may hev a friend in town ez kin post 'em ef we go ter spreadin' ther news; but ez long ez they don't know it, thau' would go a good ways to'rads buyin' off a ordinary sorter a man."

"An' you have the five thousand all safe enough?"

"Bet high on that, an' yer won't lose."

"You want ter keep that dark too, er they might be comin' fur you."

"That's w'ot. I've thunk it out. It's got ter be so ez Mister Stafford kin have it ter use ef he makes a suddint call fur it, an' it's got ter be safer than it would be in them ragged ole pants ov mine. Fu'st thing to-morrer mornin' I'll take it 'round to ther bank, an' git it inside ov ther safe. Ef they should take er noshun ter chop off his I dunno but w'ot it o'rt ter come ter me fur all ther trouble an' danger I bin put to, an' are goin' ter run ther reesk ov."

"Prehaps," said Billy slowly, as he thoughtfully revolved in his mind the situation.

"I reckon I'd sooner hev your chance with ther five thousand, than bisen with his five million. Looks ter me ez though he war in a heap ov danger. You recomember what we war a-sayin' to him afore he started out ter take ther town?"

"But you do not mean to say the gentleman is in any danger of his life?"

The interruption made Primrose start. Up to that moment he had supposed he and the landlord were alone together.

He turned toward the voice, and saw what at first sight he supposed to be a rather well-dressed boy.

"I dunno, sonny, ez you hev ary say-so in ther matter; but ef it will do yer ary good ter hear it, seein' as yer knows so much, I sh'd say he war

in a heap ov danger. They may take a nosbun ter skin his pocket fu'st, an' him arterwards.

"I hope not, for I cannot help but think he got into the trouble you speak of on my account."

"On yourn? Great Gallagher! w'ot hev you ter do with it?"

"A great deal, since he fell into their hands while fighting for me. Of that I have not the least doubt. And when I saw the chance to get away I rode off without ever thinking what was to become of him. I thought that one so brave—and he was the only man who had the courage to come to my rescue—would be able to look out for his own safety. He may perhaps be lying dead, and I have never done a thing. It is not too late. My brother must aid him, cost what it will."

"Um! I see," said Bedrock, reflectively.

"I didn't understand at fu'st off, an' you must eggskuse a leetle roughness w'ich would not hev bin thar ef I hed know'd I war talkin' to a leddy. Pony might do s'uthin'—but, by ther way, whar is Pony? I disremember seein' him 'round, an' it's s'uthin' outen ther run ter hev him missin' when ther fun are at full blast. So they say, leastwise. I'm a sorter stranger ter ther Flat, though I'm a-ketchin' on fast considerin' ther time I bin hyer."

The question was an unwelcome one, and Billy saw it had a discomposing effect on his boyish-looking guest. Hastily he interposed.

"Oh, Pony'll come out all right. He's jest bin somewhar, deep in a game, an' missed ther hull thing. Like ez not it's good he warn't at ther front. Yer see, Primrose, the young lady had a hard hustle ter get away from ther gang, but she did it, an' dodged in hyer. She seemed ter be afraid they would be after her, an' I just jumped her into that thar suit, an' you couldn't tell her from a boy from Bubbtown. They did seem to want her bad, an' I didn't blame her fur bein' a leetle skeered."

"I don't know," continued Primrose, still in a reflective mood.

"Mebbe I o'rtn't ter sav it, but now I come ter think ov it, ther gang 'peared ter hev another man. I didn't git much ov a view ov him, but somehow it kinder strikes me that other man war Pony."

"Then," said Helen, firmly, "I have a duty to perform to both of them. They must be saved at any cost. Can you help me?"

"Help you? In course I will s'long ez I kin. Yer Uncle Bedrock are a rum 'un ter look at; but he's a good 'un ter go; an' betwixt us we kin make consid'r'ble runnin' ef so it hez ter be. But I reckon Pony Taylor kin come out all right in ther long run hisself. Now, ez I see who it may be with Mister Stafford, I'm feelin' 'siderable easier."

"If they only give him a chance—yes. But if they know! Oh, there is more in this than the few thousand behind Ante Abe's bank."

"Kinder glad, in one way, ter hear yer say it. It may ease it up on Lewis, who, fur a man ov his millions are fuller ov sand than I 'spected ter find him. We can't do much ter-night, an' I ain't so sure we kin do a lot more ter-morrow; but mebbe we hedn't better talk too much tell we hev thunk it all over."

"You may be nearer right t'an you know," responded the girl, who was more excited than those who had seen the most of her would have ever thought possible.

"I must think. Perhaps I can guess whose hand is in this, and why. If so I can do more than you dream of. A desperate woman can accomplish desperate things. I must be alone."

She spoke positively, and Billy did not offer any objection.

"I'll give yer a light an' you kin bunk in whar I showed you. Ef thar are any news I'll let yer know. We'll go out bymeby, an' if I find Pony I'll fetch him byer."

"I will leave it in your hands, but something tells me you will not find him."

CHAPTER XVI.

TOM BAINBRIDGE BARELY SURVIVES.

BILLY DIVINE made his word good. After things got quieted down a little he went out, and made some guarded inquiries for Pony Taylor.

It is needless to say that no information was obtained. To allay any excitement about Miss Helen, he said she had escaped in the darkness, and come to his place for safety.

He heard considerable about the affair, and the stories agreed in the main with the one told by Primrose. Only, as every one had been kept away from the windows, no one had seen what had taken place at the rear of the building; and the fate of the genteel stranger, who had been playing in such remarkable luck just before the raid, was not suspected, though more than one inquiry was made as to how he got out of the affair.

No one seemed to think anything could be done, now that a retreat had been made, and Divine, finding there was nothing more to be

learned, made his way back to his house, where he found Rufus waiting for him.

"I'm afraid they got Taylor," he said in response to the eager glance of the man of rags.

"What they wanted of him is what I'd like to know."

"Never you mind 'bout that. Ther leetle lady kin finger it all out in ther mornin'. W'ot I want are a clear head ter be able ter take it all in ef she talks. I'm goin' ter bunk meself, ef you kin give me a shake-down thet ain't too remarkably clean. I ain't jest in condish ter occupy ther bridal room."

Billy had no idea of losing sight of Rufus Primrose if he could help it, and found him a bed without a word of objection. From the long-drawn snores soon arising in that direction it was evident the couch was satisfactory, and its occupant doing his best to clear his head.

Billy Divine being an old-timer, and remarkably shrewd, to boot, Uncle Bedrock was not at all certain when he awoke, whether he was not regarded as a prisoner.

He got up silently, slipped into his clothes, and quietly tried the door.

Almost to his surprise he found it unlocked, and that he was free to come and go.

"In course I could 'a' got out ov ther winder," he muttered.

"It mou't 'a' bin some risk fur a man ov my 'pearans ter be seen slidin' out ther back way with a bundle in me hand, but still I could 'a' tried it ef I war bent on goin', so it wouldn't bin no use ter lock ther door. Still, I tho't he mou't 'a' done it."

Uncertain exactly how he was expected to carry himself in such quarters he slouched out into the hall, and looked around him.

The first thing he saw was Divine, coming hastily out of a room, the door of which he carefully closed behind him.

"Mornin' to yer! Looks ez though ther sun war up four or five foot; an' I reckoned ter be ahead ov him least a half a inch. W'ot's ther good word? Are ther boy 'round an' stirrin', an' hev yer give her ther news ez yer picked it up las' night?"

Billy started at the salutation.

"I war on ther road ter hunt yer up. She's 'round I reckon, but wharabouts are more than I kin say. Blamed ef she ain't up an' lit out. I knocked tell I war tired, an' then tried ther door. When I looked in she warn't thar at all."

"S' that squar' goods ye'r' givin' me?" asked Primrose, doubtfully.

"Mebbe she don't want ter do bizzness with sich a ragged ole coon ez I be. Ef so, I don't blame her; but she o'r'ter up an' tole me so, an' I wouldn't 'a' bin a-waitin' on her."

"Ye'r' wrong; 'deed yer are. She's jest up an' skipped, an' ef I didn't know she could take about ez good keer ov herself ez ther most ov 'em I'd begin ter worry."

"Better worry a little, aryhov. Kinder queer she'd sherry out 'bout sayin' a word, knowin' we war countin' on holpin' her through ther ripple. S'pose we take a look over ther ground. Thar might 'a' bin foul play."

"Do you think so? I war afraid ter say that same thing, but I come nigh ter lettin' it out anyhow."

Together the two went to the room from which Divine had but lately come.

"W'ot yer call this?" asked Primrose, when he had given the briefest of glances around the room.

"Ef I couldn't see better ner that I'd wear specks, an' buy a new pair ov eyes. Thar's a billy-doo now. Le's see w'ot she says. Guess she's hit on some sorter scheme, an' couldn't wait tell we come ter look ther thing over. Hed ter bust off all alone, an' try it herself."

"I can't see ez well ez I could forty year er so ago, but I swear I don't see how I missed that," said Billy, in some confusion.

"Guess ther man ez hez ther best eyes orter hev ther fu'st chance ter read it. Sail in, pard, an' see what she hez ter say."

The note told them that Miss Helen had left of her own volition, but beyond that was not very satisfactory.

"FRIEND DIVINE:—

"You n'ed not worry on my account. I have work to do and mu't be at it at once. You can follow whatever course seems best as it is not likely anything you may do will interfere with my plans."

"I am grateful to the man who was with you last night and will make him understand it some day if I live; but will you tell him that if at any time before this matter is settled he should see me, either in the guise of last night, or in any other, it would be better for him not to recognize me until he has permission."

HELEN."

"Don't appear ter tell us more than we knew, only it sets a man's mind ter rest 'bout ther repytashun ov his house. Thar warn't no game played on her while she war hyer, an' ef I let her go her own way guess I'll be doin' my hull duty."

"Take it easy, Billy, take it easy. You lay low, an' we'll run ther masheen. Guess I'll hev a bite, an' then skip 'round to ther bank. After that I kin be riddy fur w'ot turns up."

Primrose was leisurely about his preparations, and Divine had no suggestions to offer. The

latter had his own affairs to attend to, and if Mr. Stafford had thought the tough-looking case was good enough to tie to, the game might go on with him in the lead.

So, after breakfast, Primrose strolled along the street in the direction of the bank, trying to decide in his mind how much of a story he would tell them there.

Billy had given him permission to use his name, but he did not care to do it unless necessary. He wanted to fix the deposit to suit himself.

"Thar's no use ter let them duckats be lyin' 'round so loose that Stafford's frien's kin pick 'em up in case ther railroad man don't turn up ag'in. Dog-gone it, I'm ther nearest frien' in ther case."

Such was his idea as he looked up at the building in front of which he had halted. The bank was not a hard place to find, since there was no other place like it in the town.

To his surprise the door was shut, and the shutters closed.

Certainly, the time to open for business had passed a long while ago, and he had heard nothing of Bainbridge going out of business. When he passed the spot the day before everything was running after the manner of a permanent institution.

What was the matter now?

He folded his arms behind him, under his ragged coat-tails, and ran the whole thing over critically in his mind. There must be something wrong; and it was something not known to the community. What was it?

"Won't hurt nothin' fur a customer ter try ter find out. Fu'st place, better try ther door. Wouldn't like ter crawl in ther winder straight off. 'F ary one saw me he might miscomstroom me honest intensions. Time ernoough for that later on."

It is a well-known fact that when one man stares earnestly at any particular object it will not be long, if there are any passers-by at all, before there will be others staring in the same direction.

Somehow, no one had noticed the bank did not open on time, until Rufus discovered the fact. A little later there were dozens who were wild about the mystery. As he dropped his coat-tails preparatory to beginning his investigations a man who was passing, halted by his side and looked the building over, also.

"Hillo! What's the trouble in there? Guess the cashier hasn't skipped, but it is funny there's no one about. Somebody ought to go up and see what's wrong."

"Guess they are all broke up over the trouble about the young woman," suggested a third man, who had crossed the street to join the other two.

"Guess you heard about her being gobbled by the Black Doves, and they want twenty thousand to let her fly."

"Maybe they got the twenty thousand, and it hasn't left anything for the rest of us," suggested a fourth, who was there on business, and who took in the situation without any explanation.

"Clean scoop, and no assets left for anybody," chimed in a natty-looking young sport, who happened along at the right time to join the gathering crowd, and who didn't like Tom Bainbridge, anyhow.

After this fashion the crowd grew, and presently Primrose was altogether lost sight of.

When two or three guesses at what was the matter had been made they were all hunched as a reality, and in the end there was a mob wild with curiosity, and ready for 'most anything. When some one peeped through a crack in the shutters and said there was a dead man inside, and he saw his feet, there was a blind rush, which eventually sobered down to solid work.

The bank was built for strength, and though axes and crowbars appeared so quickly it seemed as though they must have been brought along for the occasion, it took some time to batter off the lock. Then, the mob tumbled in, heels over head.

"Here's your man!" exclaimed one of the leaders, as he drew the body from under the table.

"An' it 'pears ter me he ain't ez dead ez he mou't be, an' them ez tied him up didn't do it fur nothin'. They warn't no slouches; aryhov," remarked Primrose, as he bent over the individual.

"It's Tom Bainbridge, sure as a gun!" was the shout from several who recognized the young man.

Then, some cut the cords with which he was bound, and chafed his arms, and poured whisky down his throat, and took all the means, useful and useless, they could think of to bring him to his senses.

Gradually the warmth and color came back to his face, his eyes opened, and he looked around, at first in a dazed way.

Then he appeared to remember.

"It was Pony Taylor did it! He got me here with some sort of a story, and then struck me down in the dark. Has he robbed the bank?"

"I sh'd think so," remarked Primrose. "The safe door is open, an' ther inside looks clean ez a w'issel."

CHAPTER XVII.

PRIMROSE WRESTLES WITH THE COURT AND JURY.

TOM BAINBRIDGE tried to spring to his feet when he heard the intelligence, but he was yet too weak. He sunk back, put his hand to his head, and for a moment had nothing to say, as he watched the swoop that was being made on the safe.

Primrose spoke the truth. There were a few books in their places, but the money tray was empty, and the sacks of coin which used to stand in one compartment were missing.

"Pretty rough, that, on Pony, if he didn't have a hand in it. Has any one seen him about to-day?"

The question brought to the minds of every man there the statement of young Bainbridge. No one would have suspected Taylor of taking a hand in such work, but Tom Bainbridge spoke very positively.

"They couldn't find anything of him last night. It's dog-gone queer he shouldn't have turned up when there was such a racket on the carpet. Wouldn't do no hurt to look round for him."

"I come past ther cabin whar they all live, a bit ago, an' it looks mighty much ez though they hed cleared out, root an' branch," added a rough looking miner. "Thar must be s'uthin' in it."

"If he is not out at the Elephant Lode you kin bet it's a true bill," came from another quarter.

"While Mister Bainbridge are pullin' hisself together we orter be doin' what we kin. Two or three ov yer come along an' we'll see what Pony hez ter say. If it's so, we want him; an' if thar's a mistake he won't kick ef we try ter straighten it out. I got some cash in this hyar bank, an' I don't mean ter lose it ef I kin see ther way ter save it."

By this time the crowd reached out to the street. There was plenty more being said—too much to repeat it all.

A delegation started for the Elephant Lode, in search of Pony Taylor, and in its wake Primrose attempted to walk away. He did not believe Taylor was the burglar, and he wanted to go somewhere and think the matter over quietly to himself.

The move was unfortunate, for as he passed one of the leading spirits the man caught him by the collar and swung him around, exclaiming:

"By the way, who are you? Strikes me you are a stranger, and your good looks don't speak very loud for you. No one man did this trick, and we want all outsiders to give an account of themselves."

"That's so!" added another.

"I seen that very man—him an' the slick lookin' rooster thet busted ther bank at Abe's jest afore ther rustlers took ther house. They war comin' up from ther d'reeshun ov Pony Taylor's house, an' Pony hisself warn't fur ahead ov 'em. Ef one's in ther mud I reckon ther other's in ther mire."

The suggestion caught on like wild-fire. The crowd had been prepared to feel ugly by the occurrences of the previous night, and there was no limit to their suspicions when they were once started; or to the length to which they would go.

"Ef Tom are certain an' sure about Pony, an' ef Pony hev sloped, w'ot's ther matter with seel'n' w'ot we kin git out ov this gerloot. Mebbe he knows whar ther money went to, an' d sooner squeal than croak. Let's string him up aw'ile, anyhow. Ef he's ez bad ez he looks, ther world won't miss him much ef he slips, an' goes over ther range."

Bedrock took a look at the crowd in front, and the prospect was not encouraging. It was broad daylight, and this was no ordinary gambling-house business, where a man was expected to take care of himself in the best way possible. It was true there was no actual warrant, in legal shape, issued for his arrest, but to draw and shoot would look like fighting with the law, and would be even more serious.

He could not expect to fight his way through; and if he killed any one in the effort, he was positively certain of being hung.

Metaphorically speaking, he threw up his hands. If he had been ordered so to act, he would have done it in fact.

"Come, stranger, what you got to say for yourself? Who are you, and what were you loatin' around here for? You seem to have been the first man on the ground."

"Thanks fur givin' ther ole man a chance ter talk; but I reely don't see ez I kin say ary thing eentrestin'. I jest bin a-boomin' round town fur a few days, while I war waitin' fur a man. I hed luck ernuf ter make a leetle stake offen some chaps ez th'ort they could han'le keyards, an' sense ernuf ter keep toler'bly sober. 'F thar's ary thing ter hang a man fur in that—git yer rope."

He made no demur to the jurisdiction of the court, or the right of his questioner to the office of prosecutor-general, and for once in his life tried not to be too fresh when overtaken by a difficulty.

He had not been more successful than usual. His explanation did not answer the questions

that had been asked, and there seemed to be a good chance they would be asked again, and asked real loud. The man drew a revolver with a deliberation Bedrock himself might have envied.

"This court is in no humor to be trifled with, an' you want to tell what you are asked to tell, and leave out the rest, or down you go. And you don't want to be reaching around in your pockets when a gentleman is inquisitive. There might be a mistake about your intentions. Last time! What did you come to the bank for this morning? And where is Pony Taylor?"

"Hope may die ef I know anythin' 'bout Pony Taylor. I seen him fur a minnit las' night, 'cause I heard ther nise of a tumult, an' it wouldn't be human natur' ter stay back w'en thar war a chanct ter view him a-moppin' ther earth up with Black Birtan' two pards. That's all I got ter do with him."

"An' ez fur bein' round hyer—w'ot's ther reason all these hyer other gents be hyer? Ther on'y differens are that I come fu'st. Mebbe I hed buzzniss. P'rhaps I wanted ter negoshiate fur ther loan ov a quarter; an' mebbe I wanted ter 'posit five er six thousand in ther instertoo-shun. It's a publick place, an' I'm a kerracter."

"And that slick-looking gentleman they tell about! How did it come he was rambling around in such compan'?" From what they say of him he ought to have been too high-toned to touch you with a pair of tongs."

"A gent he war—p'uffeckly reespeckt'ble. Me an' him went ter school tergether, an' he took me out to ther rooral deestricks ter talk ter me 'bout ther error ov me ways. Him up an' me down. It wa'n't no wonder he war shocked. But he orter seen me when I war at ther Gulch. Then he might 'a' talked."

"Come now, old man. There is just one way for you to save your neck. Make a clean breast of it. Tell us which way Pony went, and what was done with the coin. There is going to be some hanging before this frolic is over; but if you have sense enough to talk straight it will let you out."

"Pon me soul, I bin a-talkin' straight ez a string. I ain't heard nothin' funder about ther coin than you hev, an' Pony hez got ter answer fur hisself, I can't."

"You can give us a little information about this stranger, then? Who is he?"

"L. Stafford, esquire, an' a man ov means. Residence, 'Frisco. Travelin' fur his health, an' badn't more sense than ter come ter Paddy's Flat. He didn't say much more ner that, an' I don't rightly reecomember what he did say."

"And he was stopping—where?"

"Billy Divine's, may it please yer Honor."

"He's tellin' ther truth, ez fur ez it goes!" exclaimed a man, pushing through the crowd until he was well up front.

"He war thar; but he ain't thar now. Some ov us boys hev jest bin up ter see. Skipped las' night; an' ef he didn't go with Pony Taylor whar did he go?"

"This comes ov bein' too blame reserved," thought Bedrock, as he realized that Stafford as well as he, was under a heavy cloud of suspicion.

"'F I'd spoke straight out las' night I could 'a' hed this thing fixed true ez a try-quar', but now, saints an' angels couldn't make 'em b'lieve tell they've hung a few. 'F I bedn't slipped through so many nooses I'd think me time hed come, sure."

There was no better judge of the temper of a mob than Rufus Primrose.

He had a natural gift in that direction, and his experience, as just hinted, had been extensive. As though in echo to his thoughts there was a change in the programme. The coolly deliberative gentleman went into the back-ground, and a man with a rope came to the front.

"Hyar's a string, an' ther's a bully sign-post outside. That's ther way ter git him ter talk. Ef we can't git ther rights ov it outen him that way, I say, let him keep on a-swingin'. All in favor ov that say, 'I'!"

The eyes nearly raised the roof, and before Primrose could utter the stentorian 'no' which he had ready for the occasion the noose was flung over his neck, and half a dozen hands on the slack were dragging him along.

There was some little trouble getting through the crowd in the doorway, but after that there was no hitch in the proceedings, except the hitch around Bedrock's neck.

Understanding how the thing worked when a man in such a position attempts to hold back, Rufus was careful to keep up with the procession, and as he emerged from the bank, looked wistfully around for the sign-post.

It was not precisely as convenient as had been intimated, being several rods away, in front of the post-office.

"That gives me a leetle longer ter live," muttered Primrose, as he noted the distance.

"Queer ef s'uthin' don't turn up jest in time. It's allers bin that way afore, an' I don't see why it can't be that way ag'in. Ef not, I better say s'uthin' 'bout ther rustlers. Seems blame strange they don't ketch on to ther truth, 'thout me a-tellin' it to 'em."

Perhaps he made some suspicious movement

of his hand, or perhaps it was only the chance shot that he had been looking for.

As the crowd halted with their victim in front of the post-office some one sung out:

"Afore he is elevated jest go through his pockets! Thar's no tellin' what he may have round him."

The man with the revolver was still on guard, with the prisoner fully covered, and Rufus was altogether too red in the face naturally to change color. He gave no sign as the eager hands caught him.

Then, there was a roar as the contents of his pockets came into view.

"Hurrah! Here's his share of the money now. No use to fool 'round the bush! Up with him!"

Primrose struggled to speak, but it was no use. With such evidence in hand what more could anybody want?

CHAPTER XVIII.

HIS USUAL LUCK.

NEVERTHELESS, the chance for which Primrose was waiting did come.

The rope was over the sign-post, and willing hands were ready to drag away on it, when there was an interruption.

Down the street a man came hobbling, who pushed his way into the crowd, and finally stood with one hand on Bedrock's shoulder, and the other outstretched, as he exclaimed:

"In the name of Heaven, what is the meaning of all this? What has this man been doing? What is the matter at the bank? Where is Thomas?"

He had a number of questions to ask, but all of them were natural, since, in him, the crowd recognized Thomas Bainbridge, the elder.

Before any one else was ready with a response young Bainbridge himself spoke.

He had been lying on a lounge in the back room during the interrogation of the prisoner, and had heard next to nothing of what had been going on until the mob burst out on the hunt of the sign-post.

By that time he had gained strength enough to be able to follow, and was growing stronger as he walked.

"I am here, though if some one had not come to the rescue I am afraid by this time I would have passed in my chips, sure enough."

"Thank heaven! Nothing has happened to you serious enough to have caused all this racket. Did this man attack you?"

"That man? No. I think—I am not sure of anything that happened since last night—but I have a faint recollection of hearing his voice saying I was not dead. Lucky for me he found it out, in another five minutes I would have been, I really believe."

"Then, what is the meaning of this?"

He pointed at the rope as he spoke, and now the crowd was bound to have something to say.

"Yer bank has been robbed, Mister Bainbridge, an' we took this hyer man with his sheer ov ther job right in his pockets. Ef he didn't kill Tom he didn't miss it fur, an' we war doin' ther proper thing."

"Bank robbed, eh?" said the banker, answering the man who had spoken with the loudest voice.

"It cannot be possible. And this money—where is it? It must not be lost sight of. It looks as though there might be some danger of that happening in the excitement over the man. How much was it?"

Bainbridge was as cool as he could be, and yet the crowd could see he was very weak. His face was pale, and now he stood with one arm around the neck of his son, almost clinging to him for support.

"Oh, I am looking after that, Mr. Bainbridge," responded the man that had put Bedrock through his catechism.

"Here's the sum total as it came out of his pockets."

"An' jest the sum total ez it come outer Ante Abe's bank las' night."

Rufus spoke the truth; and regretted it immediately afterward.

"Ab," said the banker, with a dubious shake of the head, and at the same time taking the money that was handed to him.

"There may be some truth in what he says, since I scarcely recognize these notes. In fact I am inclined to think they could not have been in the safe. I know they were not when I left home. Perhaps the gentleman you call Ante Abe can recognize them. It will be the safest plan for you to go slow until you are certain of what he is really guilty."

"Now, Thomas, help me to the bank. I must examine the wreck, if wreck there is. Is it all gone?"

Very bravely did he seem to bear up under the misfortune, and no doubt he would have received a unanimous cheer had it not been for something else said at the same time he was speaking, and which came nearer to the fancy of the mob.

"Ef that's ther pile ez war won at Ante Abe's, then what's ther matter with his havin' slugged fur keeps ther stranger what won, an' collared his boodle?"

Primrose had heard the same voice several

times before, and it never said anything cheerful. Here was another danger, and the one he had thought the most of the previous night. Unless Mr. Stafford could certify to the correctness of his story he was sure he would not be able to satisfy a bloodthirsty crowd as to how that money came to be in his possession.

A chorus of assenting voices showed the suggestion was received as a truth, and so the same voice found the courage to add:

"Better h'iste him along up, an' 'vide the wealth among ther crowd. Ther stranger ain't comin' back fur it, nobow."

"I guess not," said Bainbridge emphatically, looking around once more.

"Hang the man if you want to. He does not look as though he would be any great loss to the community. But the money has been placed in my hands, and I shall retain it until I can give it to the person I am satisfied is its proper owner. Now, open the way for me to pass. I have too much on my mind to feel like trifling here."

He spoke sharply, and from spots in the crowd there arose an angry murmur. If it had not been daylight there might have been a still rougher answer. But there were many men there who would stand behind the banker, and he was allowed to pass along, leaning heavily on the shoulder of his son.

Once inside of the bank and the elder Bainbridge appeared to collapse. He dropped limply into a chair, and sat for a few moments in an attitude of utter despondency.

Then, he turned to Thomas, who was ruefully surveying the outlook.

"You are afraid to speak. Why should you be? It may mean ruin, but I am not afraid you are in any way to blame. I wish, though, I had been here."

"Would to heavens you had! This is bad enough, but it is not the worst."

"I was afraid so. I had a presentiment of evil and left the Gulch last night. On the road I was waylaid and barely escaped being murdered. I made as good a fight as I knew how, and that is saying a great deal. I suspect there is more than one sore head this morning. If I had not procured a horse from a miner who fortunately was within hearing distance I would scarcely have got here to-day. Now—the worst."

"Alta is in the hands of the Black Doves, and they demand twenty thousand dollars as ransom."

"And, in addition, the bank has been robbed?"

"Of every cent."

Mr. Bainbridge seemed staggered but not overwhelmed. There was a good deal of fight written on the harder lineaments of his face, and though he was silent for a while he was by no means weeping.

"It is somewhat strange," he said at length, "that both blows should fall together. Are they both dealt by the same hands?"

"If the young man they call Pony Taylor is a member of the Black Doves then I can vouch for it they were. He it was who inveigled me to the bank, and then struck me down. For all we know he may be Captain Columbo himself."

"Ah," said Bainbridge, with a gesture of surprise.

"I had not thought of that. Let me consider. I am afraid I am somewhat bewildered."

He looked sternly at the other for a little, yet it did not seem as though Tom was in his thoughts at all. It was more as though he was trying to gather together the threads of some tangled skein.

"It may be so," he muttered, at length.

"Perhaps I see a little light. Now, tell me exactly all you know. Begin with the abduction; and then whatever you have to say in regard to the robbery. I think I have my feelings under control once more, and can understand you. At first I was positively numbed by the shock, though it would not have done to let that crowd out there suspect it. The only wonder is they have not been talking about hanging us. They must suspect, when they have time to think at all, that this will almost mean ruin."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said young Tom, anxiously.

"I know the loss has been heavy, and if anything like the sum named has to be paid for Alta it will badly cripple us, for a year to come, but I think we can worry through all right in the end."

"Of course. And yet you do not understand the extent of the loss. There were papers there far more valuable than the mere money. It has only taken a glance to see they too are missing. But never mind about that now. Go on with your story. Time is flying, and we must decide on something at once."

Thus commanded the young man told what little he knew about the disappearance of Alta, and supplemented it with the production of the letter from Captain Columbo, which he just remembered he had in his pocket.

Somewhat to his surprise he had found that nothing on his person had been taken.

The elder Bainbridge read through the brief letter without comment, and motioned for Tom to proceed. Until he heard all, there was not a word to be said on his side.

He was very thoughtful through the recital,

and Tom was surprised, for he had not imagined his uncle could take things so coldly. The elder Bainbridge was apt to talk strongly when things were not running his way, and a furious outburst of wrath would have seemed the natural thing.

When the whole story was told, and Tom had explained how he lost consciousness and had not come to his senses until everything was over, and then had lain there for hours in an ever-increasing agony, until the doors had been burst open by the mob, with what little he knew of the scene which followed, Mr. Bainbridge had a few suggestions to make, though in his quietest manner.

"You had not finished your work, I understand."

"No. The fact is, I was lazy in the afternoon, and put off adding up things until the evening. Then I wrote a letter or two, and went out to freshen up a bit, intending to come back for a half hour to finish up."

"And probably forgot to lock the safe when you went. These men who made the raid are not professional safe-openers, and it would have taken more than their skill to throw back the lock without a knowledge of the combination."

"You will have to try and forgive me, for I am afraid I did that very thing. I thought I had made everything secure when I left, but afterward had a doubt about it, and was on my way to the bank, in spite of my excitement about Alta, to make sure. And now, what are we going to do about her? The loss of the money is bad enough, but her trouble is worse. Something ought to be decided on at once."

"Her own infernal, romantic foolishness got her into the scrape, and just now I confess I do not see my way clear. A note of hand will hardly pass current with the rascals. Most likely, if they are once convinced we really cannot pay their demand, which would be preposterous under any circumstances, they may, they must, let her go."

"But we dare not run the chances. Either some means must be taken to rescue her, or we ought to make an offer to pay whatever ransom we can. Of course we oughtn't to name a sum a cent larger than is necessary, and might begin with a lower figure even than that. Or we might lay a trap for them, follow their messenger, and take in the whole outfit. I shouldn't wonder if that was the cheapest plan, after all."

"If nothing better can be done I will temporize. We must not forget that for the present we are without the sinews of war. And this Taylor must be looked after. It will take money to do that, and if it is neglected you can imagine of what all we would be suspected."

"There is at least the last deposit," suggested Tom, with a grim smile. "Hurry up your correspondents, and meantime we can be using that. Needs must when the devil drives. If there is a loud call for it the bank will have to temporarily suspend. That is all. Certainly we can replace five or six thousand in a reasonable length of time."

"I am not so sure. I am not so sure. And yet, if the mob does not rise on us it might be done."

"Hang the mob! It is the first time I ever knew you to care a continental for it. You must be badly shaken up. You froze on to it tight enough when they talked about sharing it 'round, and I guess if they were at the door now you would be ready with a bluff, or something stronger. How much was it? I'll enter it in the day-book, to have the thing regular, and then be ready for the next customer. Business is business, and I am one of its prophets."

"This private conference has lasted long enough. I believe you are right. I would feel more like fight if some of the outside world was in sight. You can make the entry as you suggest, and then write out a notice, 'Ten thousand dollars' reward!' We must make a public matter of the robbery; but the hunt for Alta shall be a still one. We will circumvent the demons yet. But it is strange I never suspected Taylor to be that kind of a man."

The listlessness had departed now, the eyes of the elder brightened up, and he was the strong man Tom always expected to see him.

He drew from his breast pocket, where he had carelessly thrust it, the package found in the possession of Primrose.

As yet the time for the discussion of that individual had not arrived, but they were nearing it now.

With the rapid fingers of a man accustomed to handle money he ran off the notes.

At the bottom of the pile was a paper, folded, sealed with mucilage, and addressed. When he had turned it over the banker gave a start and a shout.

"What is the meaning of this? Here is my name on the back."

"Read and you will know. Perhaps it is from the man who appeared to be the actual winner—if this is indeed the spoil from Ante Abe's."

The banker was already perusing the note, and without a word placed it in the hand of the young man when he had finished. It was brief but impressive.

"DEAR SIR:—

"We have just learned of the loss sustained by your bank, and sympathize deeply. It has also depreciated the value of the collateral we hold, and we considerably make a reduction in our demands. Whilst there is an uncertainty about the value of your paper, we believe there can be no doubt of your good intentions when you sign your name. We will accept five thousand in cash, and a simple note to bearer for the balance."

"CAPTAIN COLUMBO."

CHAPTER XIX.

PUBLIC OPINION TAKES A TURN.

AS has been hinted already, Primrose had passed through an extensive experience of mob-law. He had been shot at numerous times, and cut down once or twice after the rope had begun to choke.

Now, he stood around with the meekness and resignation of a lamb. The intention was to hang him; and he had considerable curiosity to know in what shape the next interruption would come.

When Mr. Bainbridge made his appearance he thought there would be a diversion, and would have had no objection to slipping quietly away, and going into hiding or retirement until the temper of Paddy's Flat had been considerably modified.

When the banker departed it looked as though hope had gone with him. He was well aware men of his stamp were not highly valued by the world at large, and that the crowd knew it might indulge its bloodthirsty instincts without much danger from after-claps. He had no chance for a winning fight; he did not intend to beg; and so there was nothing to do but wait and see if luck would not take a turn and come his way.

Unfortunately, the mob had gone off on a new tack. From being a bank-robber Mr. Stafford had been elevated to victim, and before anything was surely known about his fate he was to be avenged.

If some of the more reckless ones in the crowd had been allowed to have their way it is more than likely Rufus would never have seen another sun rise; but unexpectedly the man who had appeared to be the most bent on doing him harm came to his rescue, though not with the best intentions.

"Say! Blame my eyes ef I don't b'lieve he wants him hung. He's raked in ther spoil, an' now he ain't a-keerin' how soon we puts this galoot whar he can't come back on him. Oh, Tom Bainbridge are sharp ez a steel-trap; but I ain't doin' his dirty work fur him. You fellers kin keep him ef yer wants him, but I'm done."

The fellow did not speak a moment too soon, since, as Bainbridge turned away, the strain on the rope began again. The men who had hold of it were playful tigers, who thought it better to haul away, and discuss the advisability afterward.

The one way to change their views was the precise one taken by the man who had been their leader. The rope slackened, and several pair of hands let go of it altogether.

"Thar's something in that same; but w'ot we goin' ter do with him?" asked another.

"Won't do ter turn him loose, an' we might ez well ez try ter keep him in ary lock-up you kin find in Paddy's Flat."

The objection seemed rather well taken by the majority, who appeared to think if nothing better could be suggested they ought to go on with the hanging.

"How would it do, gents, ter let me go on bail?"

Bedrock was watching the course of events with as much interest as any one, but he ventured the question hesitatingly, and as though he would simply call the attention of the crowd to the idea.

"Bail! Good glory! W'ot's goin' your bail?"

"Wall, it might be the old Bainbridge would. Kinder strikes me be orther."

"If you're countin' on him a-doin' yer a good turn yer' wide off. He jest shook yer fur good, ef he ever knowed ar'ything about yer. An' ef he didn't, reckon he bez too much sabbe ter no sich reeks."

"But or'nary gritertude, don'tcher see? Hyer I am, in all this mux 'cause I chipped inter his affairs. An' ef I hedn't, whar would ther kid hev bin by this time? An' hezn't he got ther collateral? Whar, oh, whar be ther duckats ov yourn truly ef they ain't in his pockets?"

"That's so; an' thar they'll stay. Dunno how be come ter do it, but he muster muzmurized ther crowd, er we'd never 'a' let him walk off with ther spiles. An' it's jest thar whar, an' which on account ov, I'm a-doin' ther kickin'."

"An' so yer orther. Ef so be I'm all right an' squar', which I be, then it orther be my coin. An' ef so be I'm all wrong, which I ain't, w'ot claim hez he got on it? It orther be divvied 'round 'mong you gents, which fust 'scovered it."

"That's true, but ther trouble it are, she won't work."

"Well, then, whar do I kim in at? Are that ther reason yer orther hang me?"

And Bedrock thrust the point of his thumb against his ragged breast, in the region of the spot where his heart was supposed to lie, and faced the crowd with the rope lying slackly

around his neck, conscious he had more than a chance for his life.

The bad men were beginning to think Bainbridge had treated them badly, and the better class had about made up their minds it was time to interfere.

He might have reached a position of comparative safety if he had called for Billy Divine in the first place, since the landlord was thought well enough of by the town to be taken as evidence.

The trouble was, he did not want to be tied up by any promises Billy might make, or run the least chance of giving trouble of a serious nature to the rough, but honest landlord. In addition, there might be danger of Miss Taylor becoming mixed up in the explanations after a fashion that would do her and her brother no good.

His disappearance was liable to be misunderstood. If it was thought she had gone to join her brother it would be a confirmation of the statement young Bainbridge had made, and which Primrose was sure was a mistake.

The enthusiasm was over, and curiosity began to get to the front.

"That's so, old man!" laughed The Edgar, the sport who had originally captured Rufus, but who had been taking a back seat since handing the cash over to Bainbridge.

"You don't hang on to the wealth hard enough to make a man believe it belonged to you, but it didn't belong to the bank, if we can believe the man who ought to know. It strikes me we ought to give you a show. Suppose we let you off for the present, are you willing to talk?"

"Mighty willin', but s'kassly able. Ef you'd 'p'int a committee mebbe it'd bring more informashun. I could talk ter them like a Dutch uncle, but this hyer crowd wants ter know too much at wuncete. I kin be a pris'nar, an' I kin be a witness; but blame my high-heeled top-knot ef I know how ter run 'em both at ther same time."

The party for the immediate execution of the prisoner began to disorganize. It was daylight, and no one had been killed in immediate view, so there was a better chance that men of moderate views would be at the front.

When they began to discuss side issues among themselves Rufus understood he was safe unless there were some further developments. A self-appointed guard had him in charge until it could be made out what was to be done with him; and Edgar was trying to resign from the committee of investigation, on which he had been unanimously appointed a member.

"It won't do, boys. I got too far to the front before I thought, but as near as I can make out this fat old rascal has nothing to do with the affair at the bank, which is the thing I am interested in. Let him skip, or give him to Ante Abe, I don't want him."

"Ter say nothin' ov ther act we orter be hearin' s'uthin' about Pony Taylor afore long. What's ther ma ter with lockin' him up in ther cellar ov ther bank tell we need him."

"Nothing, if Mr. Bainbridge is willing. But he would sooner see him hung than be bothered with him around there."

"Then, by thunder, let's hang old Tom Bainbridge too! This are a publick occashun, an' ef we don't rise to it we orter."

Bedrock, himself, shouted out this suggestion, and took such a part in the discussion, it was not sure he was not actually a leading spirit in the mob escorting him back to the bank. The fact that the cellar under the building was probably the most secure prison to be extemporized made the movement quite natural under the circumstances.

As the crowd came up the elder Bainbridge came out.

He was in haste, and had not noted the coming wave until face to face with it. He halted abruptly, as he saw it, and more than The Edgar noted his hands were on his hips, ready to draw his revolver.

"Halt, there, gentlemen! We have closed the doors until we can take stock of losses, and until things are straightened up you must come one man at a time."

He spoke with a sternness which showed he was in earnest, and the halt was made on the instant.

While speaking he had been glancing sharply over the faces there until his gaze rested upon Bedrock, somewhere about the middle of the mob.

"And that man there! I see you have not aung him, which is just as well. I want him. He can talk, after all, and I propose to make him."

"You kin have him, then; an' when ye'r done with him you lock him up in ther cellar till we call fur him. An' ef yer don't have him we'll want ter know ther reason why. Take him along, rope an' all."

In the indignation following the banker's unexpected address Primrose was shoved forward, while the crowd gave a cheer over the presentation of what they thought was a good-sized white elephant, and then trooped away at a run to meet the men who were coming from the Elephant Lodge.

The movements of a mob are apt to be erratic when not guided by a single, stern purpose.

And once inside of the bank, with the door locked behind him, Primrose was looking into the muzzle of a revolver, while the eyes looking along the barrel seemed to be saying, shoot in large letters.

"Now, you infernal scoundrel, make a clean breast of it or die. Those fools were only playing with you, but I mean what I say every time."

"In ther name ov goodness, w'ot?" drawled Primrose.

"You got my good duckats in ye'r han's, an' it'd be like a fenancyer ter blow me cold ter 'minister on ther spiles; but w'ot's ther oif, how I got 'em ef you're goin' ter keep 'em! Blow an' be durned."

"You are not as innocent as you look, old man."

"An' ef you kin see anything innercent lookin' 'bout a gent of my pussonal 'pearans, blame ef I wouldn't like ter hev the rest ov ther world wearin' the same spec's. W'ot's bit yer now?"

"You know what I mean, sir, and jesting will do you no good. You are of the gang which captured my daughter, and if I had breathed a word of it to the men who were only too willing to swing you off as it was you would have been by this time high as Haman. Along with your money I found this."

He held up the letter from Captain Columbo.

"It was because I saw the chance to communicate directly with the infernal hounds, of which I suppose you are a good specimen, that I was going out to save you if you were still on this side of the range."

"Thankee, loss, though I don't understand a bit ov w'ot ye'r sayin'. 'Pears ter me, though, thet you war comin' a trifle late."

"Away with that nonsense! You understand you are safe so long as you can be of use to me in communicating to the men who hold my daughter. If I give you the money and the note what security have I that Alta will be returned to me?"

"Deed an' double, boss, ye'r barkin' up ther wrong tree. You've went the s'kurety, but blamed ef I know who Alty is."

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT YOUNG TOM FOUND.

RUFUS was telling the plain truth, for he had heard nothing of the abduction, which had been overshadowed by the raid of the rustlers so much that Billy Divine had not noticed the mention of it when out collecting the news, and perhaps he had heard none.

At the same time, the man of rags was shrewd enough to perceive it might be as well to tell the truth in a manner liable to emendations and corrections.

From what Bainbridge had said he saw that would be his line, even if there had been no mistake.

"Perhaps you will read the letter, and then say you do not understand it, and did not have it in your possession when the mob went through your pockets."

"Ef it's ary 'commerdashun I'm willin' ter read it; but hanged ef I ever seen it afore."

Bainbridge placed the letter in his hands, watching him narrowly while he read it. When the tramp had finished he understood why he might have been in danger if the banker had not imagined he had a use for him.

"And you, I suppose, are the bearer who is to receive the note, and the five thousand dollars?"

The question was slung at him with some scorn, but more anger. Taking into account the natural indignation of a parent under such circumstances, Bedrock was inclined to think there was more danger in the pistol of the father than there had been in the rope of the mob.

"Betcher sweet life I ain't," he said, most emphatically.

"I bain't got but one job on me han's, jest now, an' that's findin' out w'ot's become ov me ole side pard, Lew Stafford. Sorry I can't help yer in ther matter, but one thing ter wonst are ez much ez I kin manidge."

"Glad to hear that you are not the man with whom I am to close the deal, since you look like one who would swindle both sides without fear or hesitation. What then are you to do?"

Primrose wanted a little time to think.

Right or wrong it would be an uncomfortable thing for him to be handed over to the mob with such a story as Mr. Bainbridge was hinting at.

If it was not for the revolver in the banker's hands he felt he could perhaps get away without having to do anything desperate; but with that pointing at him he ran the risk of killing or being killed unless he acted with caution; and if he tried to do so he might overdo the thing and heap up trouble for himself in the future.

Of course, he was puzzled to think where the note came from, and how it came to be put into Bainbridge's hands along with the unfortunate winnings of Lewis Stafford.

There was a possible explanation, though he had hardly cared to suggest it. He mentioned it now, to give himself more time.

"F I hed put them notes in yer hand, reckon

I'd hev ter father ther billy doo likewise; but I reckon I didn't, an' 'tain't fair ter try ter plaster onter me w'ot might 'a' come frum half a dozen, w'ot war interested in gittin' it whar it'd do ther most good."

"That will not wash. They were banded to me just as they came out of your pocket."

"But I didn't band 'em. An' ef I don't know nothin' 'bout 'em you kin bet yer head some 'un else does. That sport war a heap sight more likely-lookin' man than me ter be bevin' sich dockymints ter kerry."

"No, sir. The Edgar is too square a sport to be mixed up in such dealings as these. There is no sense or use in your attempting to plead ignorance, for it will blind no one. If you were only to act as messenger you shall take back my answer."

"An' how about that leetle matter ov dollars which you hev corraled? Be I ter take back them?"

"They will remain where they are. If I find no one with a better title I will hand them over to Captain Columbo, when he asks for them?"

Very firmly did the banker announce his decision, and it was not likely he would recede from it.

"But, boss, that's ther coldest kinder a deck ye'r wringin' in on me. Ef Columbo don't know yer got it how's he goin' ter ask fur it; an' ef he does, whar do I come in at?"

"That is your lookout. I am going to have some sort of security my errand is properly attended to."

"But see hyer, now. Does yer reely think, ef I war ther sorter man yer seems ter think I am, thet I could go 'way, an' leave all that thar pile behind me? It ain't in ther higher mathermatics, nohow."

"See here, my man. It lies this way: In some way or other you have made a strike. I know enough of your class to be sure you will never return to your comrades in crime with any such amount about you. To make sure you do I shall retain my hold on you."

"But ef ye'r g'wine ter give it ter Columbo—"

"Rest easy about that—unless you have robbed him. When I know my errand has been properly executed, if there is no other claimant with a better title, I shall restore you the amount you claim, the precise sum of which has been duly entered in my books as a special deposit by a man unknown."

Primrose scratched his head, and thought vigorously.

He had reasons for thinking it might be worth his while to visit this same Captain Columbo, but had been haunted by an uncertainty as to how he would be received.

This might help him.

And almost anything was better than being kept a prisoner in the cellar of the bank, to be eventually turned over to the mob.

He would sooner run some risks than submit to that. Of course, if he was to be the accredited messenger of the banker the latter would help him off, and conceal his absence as long as possible.

"Tell yer w'ot it are, boss. I don't wantar be onreasonable. You fix up yer letter, an' don't say nothin' 'bout me in it, an' I'll do ther best I kin. An' recommender, ef my pard comes fur that pile, an' sez ary thing hez happened ter me, ther stamps are hissen."

"Be still a moment. I will write the letter you are to carry; and though the villain seems to have a pretty good idea of what has happened to me I will explain the situation, and you can add the finishing touches if there is anything he does not understand."

"Jest ez yer wants it. An' w'ile ye'r writin' ov it maybe you'd let me have a glimps' ov ther fust letter he writ. I mout be better able ter tell how ter take him ef he gits ter puttin' on style. He's a cur'us man, I've heard, an' 'specks yer ter know it all 'thout a break."

Bedrock hardly expected a compliance with his modest request, but the banker tossed him the note which had in the first place been received by Eliza Jane, and then began to write. He had his revolver handy, and Primrose had been conscious for some time that young Bainbridge was sitting in his rear, silent though he had been.

"There are your dispatches," Bainbridge said at length.

"They are sealed, but to a man of your genius that will scarcely make any difference. So Captain Columbo gets them it is no odds to me whether they are opened on the way. You know better than I whether the messenger of whom he speaks in his first communication will be waiting to night for an answer. Whether he is or not I want you to deliver this yourself, and have said as much. You can start now, or wait until after dark."

"Ef you would order me up a bit ov lunch, an' see thet no committees come spookin' 'round, I guess I'd sooner wait till dark. Ez it are supposed I'm lurkin' in ther cellar it'd be playin' it rough on 'em ef they war ter meet me in ther st eet."

"All right. I will see that you are not starved; but if you remain here, into the cellar you go, both for your safety and ours. This way!"

Down the stairway Bedrock was escorted, and when the door closed behind him, and the bolts were shot to their places, he was in as safe a prison as could have been found on that side of the mountains.

Once back in the banking-room the elder Bainbridge turned to his nephew.

"And now, Thomas, we have done all we can at present for Alta, and it is time the work of vengeance for what has been done here should begin. The thieves may *cache* the money, but they can never hide themselves."

"To Hades with the money! It is Alta we should be looking after, first, last, and all the time!" exclaimed the younger man, who had been showing his impatience by more than one sign.

"Must she wait while we temporize with the villains in the mountains?"

"Rest easy, my boy. We will let the Black Dove loose to-night; but I hope to keep one end of the tether in my hand. He shall be followed, and sooner or later he will bring us straight to the lurking-places of this Captain Columbo. After that we can tell better whether to give a ransom of silver or of lead. And something warns me that when we find Alta we will also find Taylor, and with him the money of the bank."

"Ah, I begin to understand."

"It is at least worth the trying. When I learned our prisoner in the cellar had been seen with Taylor, last night, I connected him with the robbery, and when I found the note I joined him to the Black Doves. We are on the trail, and if my strength does not fail me I shall not leave it till the villains are hung."

"And the men who are to follow? You will have to get some one who understands the business, one who is a master trailer, with plenty of courage, and well up in the ways and paths of the mountains. I shall go with him; and if my advice is to count for anything I should say it would be well to have a little army to follow in supporting distance."

"Rest easy. That shall all be provided for. I have my men picked, and it will be strange if all of them are beyond reach at the shortest notice. I shall leave you here on guard—of course we do no business to-day—after you have had your breakfast, while I go out and make the arrangements. You will have but little to do, inside or outside, I suspect, and if you bar the door you can safely sleep on your post. You will need rest if you expect to follow the trail to-night."

"As I certainly will."

"We will see. We will see. There may be work for you nearer home, though I shall not ask you to take it in charge unless compelled by necessity."

There was some further conversation; Thomas the younger obtained his breakfast so nearly in the middle of the day it might as well have been called dinner; and then the young man was alone in the bank with everything secure, and a notice on the door that the doors would not open until the following morning.

There had been some calls, but they were got rid of before the next installment came.

"If uncle comes," thought Tom, "he can let himself in through the outside door with his key, and I will wake up fast enough; if there is a run on the bank I will sleep till the hinges crack. I need to for Alta's sake."

He slept very soundly indeed, and the elder Bainbridge was slow in coming. It was an hour after dark when the young man descended the cellar steps. He thought it was time to look after the prisoner.

The prison was a stout one, but—it was empty.

CHAPTER XXI.

FROM THE FRYING-PAN TO THE FIRE.

ALTA had slept the sleep of the young and just. It would be foolishness to say she enjoyed her situation, or that she was not troubled over the adventure, but she had more than ordinary courage, and was possessed with a full belief it would all come out right some way.

When she awoke it required a little pinching of herself, and a few words with Miss Matilda, to bring her to an understanding of what had happened. The light had gone out, or been removed, and in the darkness she could only tell she was not in her own bed.

Matilda, who heard her low exclamation of wonder, attempted to reassure her, but only succeeded in bringing back vividly the remembrance of the interview with Captain Columbo.

"There, there, I understand it all now," Miss Bainbridge whispered.

"Say nothing more. Of course you were tired, and it was natural you should fall asleep while waiting for me to come back. I will tell you all when daylight comes. There was nothing either encouraging or discouraging about the interview; and as the captain was masked and seated, I cannot tell you much about him."

"Hail, blessed light," whispered Matilda, in response.

"If it can't hail I would be satisfied if it would snow, just so we have a light somehow. Sleep if you can, my dear; I shall remain on guard."

"And much good will that do," thought Alta, who was uncertain as her companion as to the hour, and rather dreaded the vigil in the darkness which she feared was to follow.

She would have fallen asleep again, however, had it not been for a soft patting of feet, followed by the striking of a match. Then she saw Marquita.

The mute lighted a lamp, and then made motions.

Alta was not an expert in the language of signs, yet she understood well enough Marquita meant they were at liberty to follow her if they were so disposed. She nodded, rose from the bed, and holding Matilda by the hand, passed along in the wake of their guide.

After a little they came to a closed door, and when that was open, found themselves in open and full daylight.

Alta clapped her hands. There is a certain amount of romance about dwelling in a cave; but it is of the gloomy kind. Her spirits arose at once when she passed out into the air.

At first she was a little puzzled to understand why they were led thither, but when Marquita conducted them to a spring, which oozed out through a cleft in a rock, she understood it was to make their toilet. There was a natural basin of rock, fed by the overflow from the spring, and the mute carried a towel she had caught up as they came along.

"There's bloom upon the lady's cheek, there's brightness in her eye," said Matilda, as she looked at her fair young relative, after she had freely laved her face in the deliciously-cool water.

"You look as though you could eat a plate of doughnuts and a pound of pork sausage without its hurting you a bit. I wonder what they will have for breakfast, anyhow?"

"I am curious myself, but as Marquita is motioning us to follow once more to the cave, I suppose we shall soon know."

When they came back to the ledge they found Lieutenant Hawk waiting near the door.

He was dressed after the same fashion as the day before, and was still masked, but Alta noticed he no longer wore the belt of arms which were the tools of his trade.

"I still have the ungrateful guard duty to perform," he said, tipping his hat, or rather touching it.

"I hope you will not find me too strict, or at all intrusive. Your breakfast will be ready for you in a few moments. Until then, if you choose, you can use your eyesight in taking a view of the valley. It is not a large one, but it is a beauty."

Alta bowed coldly, but availed herself of the permission.

As he said, the view was limited, but was worth taking in—that is, to a person in the right frame of mind to enjoy it. As Alta was not so much interested just then in the beauties of nature as in her own condition, she only gave a glance at the artistic part of the scene, and reserved her gaze for the practical.

She was more interested in knowing how many men were holding this pocket among the hills, and what were the points of ingress, than she was in trying to imagine herself in Switzerland.

There were only two men in sight.

One of them was idling at the further end of the ledge, but his glance never wandered very far from where she was standing. The other appeared to be a sentinel, and his post was some little distance below them, where she thought there might be the entrance to the pass between the rocks. He stood with his rifle at a ready, and in an attitude of listening.

"Where are the rest of the men?" she asked sharply, turning to the lieutenant.

"Unless I was mistaken last night, they are usually camped down yonder. They turned in that direction when I was brought in."

"The question is somewhat indiscreet, but I suppose there can be no harm in answering. They are off on a professional excursion, leaving us here under guard."

"On guard, you probably mean."

"No. I spoke what I thought. Although I am supposed to be in command it seems I am not altogether trusted with such a treasure. They are probably afraid I might play false, and go in for the entire ransom myself."

There was no jest in the tones of the young man, and Alta looked at him, considerably mystified.

"Perhaps I am wrong," he added.

"I handed in my belt of arms on request, at all events, and am supposed to rule yonder gentlemen by the force of moral suasion alone, in case it comes to a difference of opinion."

"I see," said the young lady, slowly.

She might be mistaken, but this was something like a bid for her confidence. She would have said more had she not seen him suddenly start and fix his gaze on the sentinel below.

The man had cocked his Winchester, and was leaning forward, peering down the pass.

Then, while she looked, the man dropped to the ground, his rifle falling from his hands as he went.

There was something horribly fascinating about the scene.

Nothing had been heard, but it was plain he had in some mysterious way received his death-wound.

His hands were pressed convulsively to his breast, and had they been a little nearer the ladies could have seen the blood spouting out in a crimson stream. When he touched the ground he bounded up again, not springing to his feet, but tossing himself bodily into the air by a thrust with head and heels. Then, he rolled over and over, scratching the ground, tearing up the grass, bounding here and there as though his body was made of springs.

Lieutenant Hawk made an instinctive motion, and then remembered he was weaponless.

"Back into the cave with you!" he exclaimed.

"No honest men would open an attack with a murder, and it cannot be the Doves who are coming."

Alta stood rooted to the spot, even when Marquita caught her by the hand and attempted to pull her away.

"Horrible, horrible!" she muttered, as the sentinel gave a last convulsive gasp, and suddenly ceased to struggle.

The outlaw at the further end of the ledge came running toward them.

He had his rifle still in his hands but did not seem to think of using it.

"Hyer they come! Thar's no show fur a fight, an' it's time ter be breakin' fur ther woods. You an' me are in ther same boat, an' it wouldn't be good fur us ter be found hyer with ther gals. Fetch 'em along, Mcotenant, an' we'll glide out ther back way."

"Ye'r too late, ole boss! Han's up er bodies under! This camp's took, an' down yander comes ther new boss. Sliddy, thar! A leetle higher! Ef I hear yer hammer click I'm a pull-in' trigger."

The sentinel of the ledge was taken wholly by surprise, and would have had no chance to fight if he had cared to resist. Through the doorway which he had intended to pass came two men, and the leader covered him first and then spoke. His comrade paid his attentions to the lieutenant.

To justify his words there was a clatter of hoofs below, and out from the pass trotted a squad of horsemen, their weapons at a ready, and their eyes exploring all coverts with a readiness that showed they knew well enough where to find them.

Quite a military-looking body they were, and somewhat different from the Black Doves as Alta had seen them.

There were no masks here, and the men sat in the saddle with the dashing abandon of riders who had been born there.

"I am afraid you have made but a poor exchange," whispered Hawk.

"Those men are what are called Rustlers, and are more cold-bloodedly cruel than ever were the Doves. Whatever fate ever brought them here?"

At the head of the party rode a man dressed, like the rest, in the garb of a cowboy; but whose clothing was of a better stripe, and who seemed to be a born commander. At that distance the sterner lines of his face were invisible, and the general impression made by it was that of a handsome man, not far beyond his thirtieth year.

"Ready Rank, the King of the Rustlers, by the eternal!" muttered Hawk, as he caught a better view.

"He is a worse man to deal with than Columbo, and yet he has his good traits, when he is in the mood to show them. Beware how you anger him until he has once pledged himself to protect you. After he has passed his word he will keep it until the next deal. Listen to what he is saying."

"Much obliged to the gang for lighting up the fires and keeping the house warm, but what in eternal blazes do they mean poaching on our preserves? Look around and see how many of them are about. Treat them white if they hold their hands up, but tumble the first man who raises a gun."

At the first appearance of the rustlers Lieutenant Hawk had torn the mask from his face, and dropped it to the ledge. He was not sure whether it had been noted by the two men who had come through the door, but rather hoped it had not, as his back was toward them, and he had been quick and quiet in his movements.

"Ah, he is in a good humor," he continued to Alta.

"It will be just as well for you to say nothing about me if it can be avoided. If they thought I was a prisoner here when you came, it might help me to be of service to you. Of yourselves, tell the truth, except that it may be as well not to mention the amount of ransom Columbo demanded. There is no need for Rank to think you are of too much importance."

"Rest easy," replied Alta.

"I shall have as little to say as possible in regard to myself. He sees us now. Speak quickly if you have anything more to say."

"He has seen us all the time, I think; and these men behind us have their eyes open. Wait in patience for the outcome, and keep your companion with you."

"See! They have two prisoners of their own," interrupted Matilda, who had remained

silent so long her presence had been almost forgotten till the lieutenant spoke of her.

"Chained in the market-place he stood—or—er—at least, they have them tied on two horses. Are they going to gather everybody here?"

"Hush! The less you seem to notice the better. I think we will soon be able to guess something about our own fate, which is uncertain enough at present to give us all the trouble we want without borrowing any on account of others."

As an answer in some sort to Alta's suspicion, the leader of the rustlers looked upward toward the ledge.

"Ho, there, Jack! Bring down these people so we can size them up. We want to find out what they are doing in our kingdom."

CHAPTER XXII.

LIEUTENANT HAWK BIDES HIS TIME.

JACK was the man who, in company with a companion, had come out from the cave, and captured the fleeing guard. So far, he had said nothing to Hawk and the three females, though he had given a warning glance in their direction, which caused the other man to cover them with his revolvers.

At the order he stepped his men forward, while Hawk led the way for the ladies without any urging.

The way downward was neither long nor difficult, and soon they all stood in front of the rustler captain.

The Black Dove was sure he had fallen into the hands of some brother outlaws, and that he was all right if he surrendered gracefully to his fate.

The ladies felt they could hardly be in worse plight than they had been, and hoped they were in a great deal better.

Lieutenant Hawk had his own views; and perhaps feigned an ease he did not really feel.

As they filed up, Ready Rank looked them over, singling out first of all the outlaw to receive his addresses.

"One of the Black Doves, I should judge by that mask. Sonny, can you tail a steer when the critter has the bulge on you, and is coming head first?"

The fellow stared up, uncertain what answer to make.

"You don't want to do yourself proud with a wholesale lie, because if there is any chance of your having done it we'll test your truth. You'll either tail a bull if you say so, or you'll hang if the bull tails you. Sabbe?"

"Kayrect. I ain't learned yit how ter lie, an' I ain't beginnin' now. I dunno nothin' 'bout tailin' a steer, an' don't want ter."

"All right. You won't do for one of Ready Rank's rustlers. There are only first-class cowboys riding with him, and every one of them can do the trick without a slip-up. You can get back. You look as though the best use for you was to put you in the bone-heap; but we will see later on. Guess it will be unhealthy for you anyway it turns out. You don't want to settle in Paddy's Flat, I'll swear to that! Ha, ha!"

The chief laughed not unmusically, and the fellow mumbled something in reply as he fell back. He had heard of Ready Rank, and was not at all comfortable over the joke about the bone-heap. He thought it might be grim earnest as he looked over to where his dead comrade lay.

"And you folks—you hardly belong to the gang! What are you doing here?"

It happened he was looking straight at Marquita as he spoke. She could see she was addressed, and answered after the manner of her class. She shrugged her shoulders, shook her handsome head, and touched her lips and ears with her hand, showing as plainly as could be that she was both deaf and dumb.

"And you, too," he said sharply, turning to Alta.

"With such eyes in your head I will wager you are not mute. This is not the place for a picnic. What brought you here?"

Alta did not take time to consider the spelling of the rustler's "too." She understood he referred to Matilda and herself, and answered accordingly.

"As I understand, it was a gang of outlaws, known as the Black Doves."

"And what has become of the Black Doves, now? There seems to be a shortage in their ranks, or they are not as numerous a flock as has been reported."

"I know nothing about them. We were left here under guard, but I suppose they expected to come back. I am not sure whether Columbo went with the rest. If not, perhaps he might be found in there."

She pointed to the door of the cave, but Ready Rank shook his head.

"Jack came through that way, and reports no one in sight; but some sweet old spoils lying around for the picking up. The fool ought to have known better than try to jump my claim. I can guess his game. Lovely woman in a heap of trouble; weeping relatives ante up a big pot; girl sent back rejoicing; and Columbo gathers in much spoil. Who are you, and where did you come from?"

"I am Alta Bainbridge, and my father is a banker in the Flat. If that was Columbo's plan he would have come out on the losing side, even if you had not appeared to our rescue. Any demands he made would more likely have been answered with lead than gold."

"Ha, ha! You have nerve, anyhow. I should judge you were new to this section of the country. The little game is a more serious one than you seem to think. As to the rescue—the less you gush over that the better, until you see how it is going to turn out. How did they come to get hold of you—take you right out of town, like we did our luggage?"

He glanced slightly toward the prisoners whose presence Matilda had detected. They had been loosened from the horses carrying them, and now lounged on the ground, evidently well tired with their ride.

"Oh, no. We were rambling on the mountain, near the town, when they made their appearance. I shall expect you to return me to my father, now. You will be certain of his warmest thanks; and as large a pecuniary reward as he can give, if you choose to accept it."

"Thanks, my child. The scheme may be worth the working, but it requires consideration, and an investigation into his financial standing. I suspect that his resources are already pretty well exhausted. The fact is, we have the butt-end of them in yonder sack."

"What?"

Alta was too much amazed to think of politeness. She put her question in the tersest of shapes.

"Fact! I just looked into the sack enough to see what sort of a prize I had drawn in the lottery, and I didn't have to rustle far before I found it was a capital one. There is coin there, without end, bank-bills by the cubic ton, and papers enough to start a court house and furnish all the documents."

The young lady was absolutely stunned. It never occurred to her to doubt the accuracy of the information. One thought came to her first of all, when she had shaken herself a little together.

Could such a capture have been made without bloodshed?

She tried as well as possible to control her voice.

"Pardon the question, but I suppose you intend me to accept what you say in sober earnest. How did you get the things you mention?"

"The spoils of war, madam, the spoils of war. Took them in an honest hand-to-hand fight."

"Was—was any one killed?"

"You can place a small stake on that card. There was considerable shooting going on, and it was not altogether done at large. But—hold on! I understand you now. You needn't faint."

Alta's face at last showed signs of more than excitement. She reeled, and would perhaps have fallen if Lieutenant Hawk had not dexterously given her the support of his arm.

"I might have known you would be worrying about your father. As far as I know he is all right. We got the stuff from the other fellow—the gang that had gone through the bank, and then hadn't any more sense than to try butting their heads through the lines of the rustlers. Of course we stopped them only too quick. I had some idea of making a deal on the papers, which seem to be of some value. That was what brought us in here."

"You took them—who from, if not from my father?"

"Oh, the Black Doves; or some other thieving gang, with more nerve than brains. If the things show up as well as I expect I will send a man in to open up communication, and he can tell your father you are well, happy, and enjoying your visit clear up in the altitudes. It will make him all the more ready to deal when he knows what great friends we have been to his daughter."

"Friends! Good heavens!"

Alta realized that she had gained little if anything by the exchange of jailers, and drew back despairing. Ready Rank had led her on to keep up quite a conversation with him, and there were even yet questions she would have asked if she could have trusted her voice to utter them.

The rustler chief smiled.

It was not a pleasant smile, somehow. Up to now he had not been a bad-looking man, and from his language appeared to be above his class. When he smiled, though, his white teeth showed savagely under the corners of his mustache, and he looked about as pleasant as a wolf on the war-path.

"Do not be despondent, my child. The fact is, your father and I are old friends, and I could hardly contain myself when I found that sheer, blind providence had put such a chance in my hands as that which came to me when I cornered the contents of yonder sack. I can't say I am as glad to see you, but I never waste a dispensation that may be in my favor. Perhaps it would be better for you if I could forget you are the daughter of your father, though I hardly think I shall try. You and your friends can retire. I will have something to say to this gentleman later on. It strikes me I can use

him. Just now, I have other prisoners it may be as profitable to examine. There seems to have been no end to the good things coming to my net this last scoop."

"Another enemy!" murmured Alta, in a voice too low to reach the rustler's ears.

"Can this be truth they are telling me, or is it intended to play upon my imagination, and make me think the danger greater than it really is?"

"I don't seem to catch your words, but no doubt they are of no great importance. Just follow your jailer, who, I think, can find your old quarters. I will look around, and see whether I cannot locate mine."

Hawk and Marquita made no objection to being included in the party. The girl kept close to her charges; and the lieutenant was willing to drop his identity. It appeared his best scheme to get out of a bad box.

The chief looked sharply after him as he walked quietly away by the side of Marquita.

"Nice little picnic that must have been; but, somehow, he don't look like the proper man for the situation. There may be a dearth of material in the Flat, but he looks as though he would be more at home with a revolver in his hand, than a ladie's favor. When the time comes I will have to find out who he is before I trust him to negotiate."

Two of the rustlers were walking off with the prisoners, but Jack remained by the side of his commander.

"Looks ter me ez though he don't b'long at ther Flat at all. His face are mighty f'milyer like; an' if I ever seed it afore it warn't thar."

"I don't like your men who are so quiet. They need watching. Now I will look up headquarters, and get ready for business. The Black Doves will hardly get along for some hours yet, if they come at all. If they do we must be ready for them."

CHAPTER XXIII.

READY RANK ORGANIZES HIS CLASS.

OF course Ready Rank told the truth when he said this spot had been one of his old lurking-places.

It had been so long since he had visited it, however, that the Black Doves had been given plenty of time to get comfortably warm in the quarters they had taken possession of, and to make great changes.

"Really, it pays to have a man of taste try to contest your claim, if this is the way he fixes up things for you by the time you get into them again. He must be a man of nerve to waste his wealth in fitting up his headquarters after this style before he has tried conclusions with the first settler."

He turned suddenly, as he heard a step at his back; but it was only the man known as Jack.

"Beg yer pardon, Cap. We missed ther kitchen ez we come through, an' lookin' it over ag'in' it 'pears we found ther cook."

"If there had been twenty-four men with blunderbusses, I suppose you would have missed them all the same. You are a lively man for a scout!"

"Not quite that bad. We give a glimps' in, but ther blame squaw war under ther table. We smelled ther things a-cookin', though, an' when we went back thar she war."

"Good enough, then! We will pardon your negligence for the sake of the discovery. I confess to being sharp-set enough to relish 'most anything in the line of grub. Set up the table and bring in the breakfast. I won't wait on the company cook."

"All right! Yer won't lose nothin' by ther 'xchange. An' it looks 'zef them pri-ners bedn't hed ther grub yit, theirselves. Guess thar's 'nuff fur all ban's, an' some ter spare."

"Look after my interests first, and then after theirs. No telling how soon I will have to be in the saddle."

Quite a fortunate thing it was for the prisoners that Jack found the cook. Otherwise they might have had a long wait for their breakfast. Ready Rank was willing to take advantage of the discovery; but it was so evident there was a superabundance of edibles that he dispatched his henchman to the prisoners as soon as he was certain of the fact, and when he found they had been fasting ordered them attended to at once. The four made a very respectable breakfast, considering their situation.

"Now then, Jack, lead in the fellows we picked up in town. It's not likely Columbo can put in an appearance for some hours, but when he does come he may keep us busy for a while, if he is as good a man as I have heard."

"Kinder didn't hev a fair shake las' night, did he? Tuk him by s'prise, an' beat him out afore he got ready ter fight. Ef he comes this way wouldn't wonder ef he thinks he's allers s'prised."

"True for you; but we may as well have things arranged before he comes, so that we have plenty of time to do ourselves justice all around."

Mr. Stafford came in quietly. In fact, since he had actually been a prisoner beyond the power of successful resistance he had been very quiet.

He was inclined to think his abduction had

been incidental, and on account of his interference in behalf of the fair dealer at Ante Abe's.

At the same time, he recognized the unfortunate nature of the position.

Money ought to secure his release; but if they knew with whom they were dealing, the outlaws might demand altogether too much money. He felt that he must convince the rustlers of his ability to pay a good ransom, yet must not lead them to expect too much.

Ready Rank was taking it easy, ensconced in the comfortable furnishings of Captain Columbus. He looked up at the entrance of the prisoner and motioned him to a seat.

At another motion the guard vanished.

"What were you doing in Paddy's Flat?"

The abrupt question was by no means what Mr. Stafford had expected. It seemed to have reference to his mission, as though the rustler captain knew something about it.

But, being ready for the worst, the railroad magnate showed no surprise.

"Playing faro in Ante Abe's gambling saloon," was the immediate answer.

"Worse luck for me that you were. You are no sport, and the pop-gun you carried wouldn't have knocked out a healthy-sized flea. How does it come you chipped in so desperate like when the rest of the town took a back seat?"

"Probably because I understood what the rest of the town did not, that a woman was being assaulted. I knew it was a gratuitous piece of brutality. She was not the treasurer of the establishment, and there was no earthly reason for it. If you are as white a man as you look, you will not only give me thanks for trying to teach your men a lesson, but overhaul the offenders, and toast them on the coals."

"You think? Or, rather, you don't think anything of the kind. The money at Ante Abe's was a secondary matter, and reached at only for the sake of the boys. It was the woman we were after. And but for you the swoop would have been successful. What do you think I am going to do with you?"

"I judge you are a sensible human being in some respects at least, and you must know there is nothing to be gained by talk of that kind. You will turn me loose after having found out of just what amount I can be robbed. I think you will even be willing to escort me a portion of the way toward town. It was hardly light enough for me to take much notice of the road as I came along, and it would not be for your interest to have me get lost on the way back."

"Rather a cool hand, are you not?" sneered the rustler.

"You probably think if we were willing to risk ourselves in the Flat for the sake of the pitiful five thousand, we are ready to play any ten-cent game you may suggest. It will be a long time before your anxious friends hear from you again, unless—"

The rustler stopped, and looked maliciously at the face of his prisoner. There was light enough and to spare, so that Stafford could not help but notice the expression.

"Unless what, sir? The sooner we understand each other the sooner we get down to business."

"Perhaps, if you understood the platform on which I do it, you would not be so anxious to get to that same business. What I was going to say contains a grain of hope for you, that I suddenly thought you might do without."

"Give me no grains. If I cannot have whole bucketfuls I want none at all. For what did you bring me here?"

"Just to see what sort of a man you are."

"And you have found out?"

"Better, perhaps, than you think. If your face didn't tell the story your clothes and the way you wear them would. You think your money can help you out of any scrape if you can have a chance to talk. You may be worth a million or two."

Stafford shrugged his shoulders, and muttered, as though to himself:

"If I only was!"

"Well, old man, for your sake it is to be hoped you are. If you have ever heard of Ready Rank you have been doubtless told some strange stories of the way he handles his prisoners. For once I am going to be equal to my reputation, whatever I may have been in the past. Shall I tell you what I mean?"

"Suit yourself. When you get done with nonsense I will be ready with hard sense. I know nothing about your reputation, but I do know there can be no reason why you should throw a thousand dollars over your shoulder. I don't suppose all this prancing around is done from the mere love of adventure."

"A thousand! Ha, ha! Why, man alive, I would think you ashamed to speak of such a figure. I'll finish the sentence I interrupted, and then make an addition which has come to me entirely as an afterthought. Unless the little lady who presides over the destinies of Ante Abe's table comes into my hands within a reasonable time I'll hang you higher than Haman. Unless, again, you hand over a cool million."

"Let us hope, then, I am to be hanged. The one condition I wouldn't see complied with if I could. The other I couldn't if I would."

"Don't be too positive in your way of speak-

ing. It may seem funny, while everything is serene; but it might lead to a little preliminary wakening up, a little foretaste of Hades as it were, that would be enough to alter your tone. The boys out there are playful devils, and know just how far to go with a man when they have a warning, but they like to cut to the raw when they do have a fellow running down the gantlet. And, of course, they are none too friendly to you after the squabble in town."

"I am in your hands, and as long as nothing better nor worse can be done, I take things as they come without a murmur. You might get me in the line of the gantlet; but I'll swear you couldn't make me run. Not unless I saw a chance for escape, and something else, at the end of it."

"Once in the line and I'll vouch for the rest. My men have a way of making a balky cayuse show its paces."

"I won't offer to bet on it, because that would be tempting Providence, but I will wager something that I make more out of this adventure than you do. Luck has stood to me too long to throw me over at last. Better make friends with me while you can. It may not be long before I will be up and you down."

"A square bluff, and if I thought it came straight from the heart I wouldn't like you any the worse for it. What is your name?"

"Lewis Stafford."

"Where from?"

"San Francisco."

"By Heavens! We have made a capture. Old man, I know you. If I hadn't fixed my figure already I would double it. It seems like sheer folly to let you off at a beggarly million, but you know the worst now, and ought to be thankful you are going to save your skin at such a trifling expense. That will do."

"Excuse me for venturing to suggest there must be some mistake about it."

"Don't suggest a blamed thing. Go and think it over how you can best pay that sum into the royal treasury with the least delay. And mind what I said. If it don't come in a reasonable time I'll hang you. If we can't have gold we'll have fun. Ready Rank may not be able to run a revolution, but we can give the commercial world a shock, and that is 'most as good."

"Though hardly as profitable. Don't forget, however, there is another contingency. If you are such a man of your word I may get off scot free, after all."

"That's so. I didn't think of it," responded the rustler, in a tone of disappointment, as he was reminded of the conditions he had made. "But don't take the chances. Think up your plans, and I'll see if the next man pans out as well. Such amazing luck begins to beat the Dutch."

CHAPTER XXIV.

BEST OF ALL.

THE captain gave a low whistle, and instantly his guard appeared. Evidently he had not been out of hearing distance.

"Take off this man, and tell the boys if I have made no mistake he is worth a cool million. That will keep their eyes open as much as anything can, and make them understand it will be unhealthy for the man who lets him escape. And when you leave him where he is safe, bring on the other fellow."

Stafford would have had something more to say if he had been allowed the opportunity. He understood Ready Rank had recognized his name, and would have liked to make at least an effort to convince him he was mistaken in the matter of identity.

His mouth was already opening when the captain gave a motion with his thumb which meant haste, and the guard acted accordingly. His hand reached out for Stafford's coat-collar, and he gave the man of millions a twist which sent him spinning.

"Right about, forward march!" he added in a jeering way.

"Don't you know enough to march when the commander gives the word?"

To the rustler the more millions a man had the more helpless he would seem. If he had thought the prisoner without a cent in the world he would most likely have been less careless. Stafford waited until the rustler had stepped again to his side, and then, whirling toward him, sent out his right fist as straight as he knew how.

The fellow flew one way; his arms flew in several others. Knives, pistols, cartridges, and the like, appeared to be scattered all over the floor. He kicked several times convulsively, as though his neck might be broken, but finally struggled to his feet, his hand fumbling for the revolver no longer in his belt.

As Stafford struck he gave a quick glance toward the captain, and saw he had drawn a weapon. There was little chance for the rush he had half-thought of attempting.

It was tantalizing to see the revolver lying where it would only take a step and a stoop to grasp it, but he knew the chief was a certain shot, and the step was not taken.

Instead, he folded his arms and fell into an easy attitude.

"Served you right!" exclaimed Rank heartily.

"You are getting too blame careless, and I would a good deal rather something of the kind happened here, than somewhere else, when you were alone and the road looked open."

"It was a foul blow, captain. I wasn't looking for it. Just let me try a go at him to show you he can't do it again."

The fellow doubled up his fists, and acted as though he was going to make an immediate assault on the prisoner.

"None of that, sir! Of course, you were not looking for it; and that was what made it so bad. When a rustler is taken off his guard there is only one thing to be done with him."

"Excuse me, captain," replied the fellow, in an altered tone.

"I'll own up. I was careless; but it won't happen again."

"And keep your hands off of him as long as he is peaceable. Time enough for such work when I give the word. Pick up your tools and go. We will call it square this time; but the next it will take a couple of the boys to carry you. And maybe it is a pity the gentleman didn't make it sure their trouble would be saved."

Silently the guard picked up the belt which had loosened from his waist, and then the balance of his belongings, Stafford standing, meantime, in the same attitude he had taken just after the blow was struck. When the guard was ready the prisoner marched off without hesitation, as though he thought one lesson would be sufficient.

"A nervy rascal he is, to be worth millions," mused the captain.

"One would think he didn't care a continental what became of him so they were all right. I would hate to have to kill him; but it may be something of the kind is on the cards for the future. I would sooner have the million, though."

While he was thinking about Stafford the moments slipped along so rapidly he was surprised when the remaining prisoner was ushered in.

It must be remembered that Ready Rank had not paid much attention to his captives after leaving the town, and had turned over the individual who had fallen into his hands to one of his men to look after without more than a glance to make sure he was living. He did not know he would have any use for him, but the horse was worth something, and it was just as easy to take the man along with it, and drop him afterward.

This prisoner had been fully as quiet as Stafford, and when the retreat was reached he was, if anything, more exhausted. He had been tied to the saddle in a workmanlike manner, and when the ropes were cut from him he had been well content to sink on the ground, though he did it with such a silent protest his real condition was hardly observed.

"And here you are," said Ready Rank, looking up as the prisoner entered.

"They might have given you a chance to wash a little of that blood off your face; and for the society of ladies a little attention to that clothing of yours would not be out of place. I'll see if I can't fix you up when we get done with our little confab. How in the name of the holy Maverick did you get into the hands of that gang; and what did they want with you?"

Rank was as cordial as though he had not allowed him to go bumping along the trail for hours without a thought of the cords eating into his flesh.

"A good many questions," answered the prisoner, in a husky voice, scarcely above a whisper.

"I guess I can answer them all, but if I forget any put me in mind of them."

"Only two, and any man with a straight tongue can answer them in short order."

"That is so, take them as they stand. All I have got to do is to say, I don't know. But that would explain nothing."

"Better not try explaining. You might do a little too much. I'll say it all over again, and a little slower. Who were those men who were rousting you out of town?"

"I know nothing about them, except that they must have been robbers. I saw there was something wrong on the street, met young Bainbridge, who belongs to the bank, and went around with him to see if all was right there. When we went in they must have been lying in wait for us inside, for while he was striking a match down we both went. They hit me pretty hard, for I didn't know any more until they were in the fight in the street. I thought I couldn't get into worse hands, and I don't believe I did."

"What you think is of small account. Now, what did they want to carry you off for? Any relation of the people who run the bank? Going to hold you back for a snug pile, if they hadn't raked all the coin the bank could raise?"

"Hardly. I have little acquaintance with the Bainbridges, and from what I have seen of them I judge they are not the people to dip very deeply into their pockets for the sake of an outsider. It may be they made a mistake, taking me in the belief I was young Tom. If they did they were badly fooled."

The rustler listened attentively, and yet he

was scarcely paying the attention to his words that the prisoner thought. He sprung up suddenly and made a step or two forward, peering into the blood-begrimed face.

Then, in high glee, he shouted:

"Oh, come off the roost! I know you now; and I would have known you at first sight if you hadn't had your face painted quite so red. I thought Black Burt took you in for keeps, but this is better yet. Why, we are going to have the most delightful time out of jail before we get through here. Don't you know who I am, Pony Taylor?"

"You have the advantage of me."

Pony Taylor—for he it was—answered just as huskily as ever, though had he been so minded his voice would have sounded as clear as a bell. He did not care to allow it to be seen that the disguise he had attempted had been penetrated.

"Advantage! Heavens! I should think I had; and one I wouldn't have missed for the million I'll make out of that other man who is trying the role of injured innocence. Male and female, I have an account to settle with the Taylors. I didn't mean to try to do more than keep you off the trail while I attended to business with the feminine part, but this claps a new wrinkle on the features of the case."

"You didn't want to deal with a man, yourself. That's what you mean. Don't be too joyful. From what I picked up on the way out I judge there has been a hitch in the proceedings and half-way decent luck coming our way will make things lively for your side of the house."

"Begin to raise your hackles, do you, when you find out there is no use to try to crawl into a corner? That's right. Ruffle up! This is Ready Rank's last game in this line, and the more excitement there is in it the better it will be to remember."

"More truth than poetry in that. If you put your paws down hard alongside of the Taylors it will be your last game, sure enough; and it will not be Ready Rank who will do the remembering."

"Talk up, old man; talk up! It does me good to hear you. The fact is, I had laid out to find beauty at the Flat, and the booty at another point; but here they both come together, and when the stroke is finished I will be able to make my trip abroad in all the style the ex-rustler would care to show—and that is saying a good deal. At the same time, it depends entirely on yourself whether your funeral happens or not, before we go."

"A shade of truth again. If I don't help myself I am afraid no one will be able to do the trick for me. And never fear that I will not try hard enough."

"If you only take the right plan. I am not sure it is exactly the thing to slaughter one's brother-in-law, if there is any other possible use for him."

"Don't make a fool of yourself. Because I dropped into your hands by chance is no sign such luck will hold out."

"No chance, then, to call a truce, let bygones be bygones, and have a general family reunion, with all hands happy?"

"A thousand times, no!"

"Then the reunion will take place, and some of the family will not be so happy. I am not done with the Flat, and the people who live there. A lull don't show the storm is over, and I am keeping a keen lookout for the lady of my heart."

"You bound, you! You know it is safe to say such things now. When my hands are free it will take a man of more courage than Ready Rank possesses to talk that way to me, face to face."

"And you know that you can wag your tongue pretty much as you want to until it is certain there is no more use for you. After that—the man slinging such words at me would be strangled with my own fingers."

Rank crouched, as he spoke, like a tiger preparing for a spring, his dark face working with rage. The interruption which came was none too soon.

"Cap'n, we reckon ther Black Doves are a-comin', an' ther boys are a-waitin' fur orders?"

The trusty Jack stood in the doorway, apparently oblivious of what he saw as he gazed into the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

CAPTAIN COLUMBO TAKES A HOMING.

CARELESS as Ready Rank and his rustlers had appeared, they were not off their guard as much as they seemed. An outpost had been dropped behind to watch well the approaches to the spot; and all hands were ready to move out at a moment's notice.

It would be next thing to impossible for any body of men to approach beyond certain limits without being seen in time to have the entire force at the outposts.

Ready Rank took his time to answering the call, though the interview closed between him and Taylor without further threat or taunt, and the prisoner was hurried away by the guard, who wanted to get him in his prison quarters before the frolic began.

And the frolic and fun was all on the one

side, for the Black Doves had seen none of it, and were not very likely to for awhile to come.

A more disgusted set of men had never been seen than they were as they slunk away from Paddy's Flat.

At the outset everything had gone along better than they had dreamed, and they were getting away with much plunder and a very quiet prisoner, when they unfortunately stumbled across the rustlers.

The only gleam of comfort to be had about the affair was that it was no worse. There was not a man in the outfit who did not know if as much firing had been done by the other side as was done by theirs, there would have been a good many more corpses than that of Jackson to leave by the roadside.

Once out of town without having attracted close observation or pursuit, and they felt themselves safe for the present, and every man considered himself entitled to do his full share of grumbling so long as he did not actually shout.

The leader, however, remained silent, until some miles had been placed between them and the town.

Then, at a lonesome spot, where there could be but little danger of intrusion, he called a halt.

"You have had your say, my men, and ought to be satisfied with the amount of grumbling you have done."

"That is all right. I wouldn't give a cent for a soldier that wouldn't grumble—I would be afraid he wouldn't fight. Now it is my turn to say something, and you want to keep quiet while I am saying it."

The line of men became silent at once, showing discipline was not forgotten.

"There has been an ugly failure, and no mistake; but no one man can be reproached more than another. It was hard luck to begin with; and beyond that, one man shot about as wild as another. One thing is certain: It was not the men of the Flat with whom we had to deal. They never could have handled us in that fashion, let alone the fact of their being mounted."

"Correct you are, captain," spoke up one of the men.

"They just sat on those horses as though they lived there; and I'm betting big money—when I get it—that half the time they do. It's my opinion they were a gang of rustlers, on the same business as ourselves, and when it came to fighting in the saddle, they just got away with our luggage."

"My idea exactly; but that don't help us a bit. I don't care a cent about the reason we ought to have been whipped; it's the plunder that I am interested in. We did the work, and did it well, without a mistake or a slip-up, and then they come along and lift the loot and gallop off with it, and our horses besides. If it was not that the Flat will have no eyes for any other than the direction they have gone we might have a pretty hustle to get away at all."

"But how did they come to be on the spot?" asked the private in the ranks, who seemed to be acting as spokesman for the rest.

"You don't mean to think any of us went back on the crowd, and sent them word where and when to strike in for plunder?"

"No, I do not. No one knew—not even myself—until it was too late to do it, when the stroke was to be made. It was just a chance, as I said before. The question now is, can we do anything to help the matter. There was a heap of plunder there, and it is worth a fight to get it back again. Another time we would understand better what we had to do."

"And aim lower," suggested the man in the ranks.

"We are not scared of them, and if you can point them out we will try another hack if it takes a leg off."

"I thought you would be ready, but the trouble is, we are in no condition to follow, and they will not be likely to wait for us. At the same time, there is no telling what Ready Rank will do—if it was his gang we stumbled against."

"That's so. If he took the notion he would just as soon as not camp right in the middle of the town, and stay a week. That's what he did at Sandy Bar."

"I have been thinking of that, and it has struck me he might at least camp somewhere in the neighborhood, especially if there is no pursuit. If he should do so we should know it."

"Why not rustle for a horse or two, and put a couple of men on his track to find out? If he just holds on till we can find him, there will be one more hand to play in this game; and we'll take every trick."

"My idea; though I do not think it best to carry it out exactly in the way suggested. I wanted to make sure you were all of the right mind, even if we have to deal with such a man as Ready Rank."

"Take your own plan for it, then. We stand by what you say, and always did."

"Then, my idea is this. It will not do to fool along after the rustler king until we know what the Flat is going to do. If they stumbled across any one else on the trail they would take him into camp too quick, and like as not elevate him without judge or jury. If they are going to

turn out, our men must get behind them, or else keep 'way in front."

"Right, to a t-y ty; but I'm willing to run the risk if you say the word."

"No need for that, Hambleton. I think I can manage it better. I have a good man or two in Paddy's Flat, as you know, even if I have preferred to keep who they are to myself. I will take the risk and go back to communicate with them. They can take the trail without exciting suspicion, even if they make themselves members of the town people's party. If they can locate the raiders they can communicate with us. Through them I can find out too what is being said and done, and whether we are in any danger of being followed."

"Straight as a string. That is good enough for me and the rest of us. But what will we be doing? Shall we stay here till you come back?"

"Hardly. Drift back toward the Knob, and wait there until a couple hours after daylight. If I have not come by that time you had better make for the retreat and get ready for the trail. There will be mounts for the most of you there, and we can press some stock if it is necessary, though I do not want to do that till our plans are laid."

"But if they catch on to you in town?"

"Little danger of that. If they do you will have word of it from the agents I spoke of. If I do not turn up it will most likely be because I am on the trail myself, and do not need you."

"Guess we understand it all. When the milk is spilt it's generally the best plan to catch another cow; but this time I feel like trying to save it anyhow. How soon will you be going?"

"At once. You will have command of the Doves in my absence; and I am sure I can depend on them if I send for them. I'll not give it up till the last horn has blown."

As the captain hurried back toward the town he shrugged his shoulders and muttered to himself:

"That fixes it all so plain there can be no mistake, and yet it is taking big chances. I wish I had left Hawk his revolvers—though he is not the man I take him for if he cannot find another pair in case he sees a need for them. If anything should happen to me I don't know that I would care to trust Hambleton too far. I have had my suspicions of Hawk, but he would be the better man for the situation, anyway."

The town had quieted down, when the captain reached its outskirts.

The spasmodic pursuit of the rustlers had come to an end, the body of the unfortunate Jackson had been removed to a vacant shanty, the people were gathered in the saloons to talk things over, and there was but little danger or difficulty in entering the place.

Columbo had already discarded his mask, and exchanged his hat for a cap. A few other changes were also made in his appearance, and then, without hesitation, though with noiseless footfall, he hurried along the street.

Near Billy Divine's hotel he halted suddenly, as he heard some one approaching. When the steps went up on the porch and there was a low tapping, followed by a brief conversation, he drew nearer, and keeping in the shadow of the building listened to what was being said.

The speaker was Rufus Primrose, who was just working his way into the hotel, and what he said gave something of an account of the way things stood in Paddy's Flat.

There were some things said, however, which appeared to excite the curiosity of Captain Columbo.

"Here's a mine of information," he thought to himself.

"I may as well work it for what it is worth. He knows as much as any one I can get hold of, and perhaps a good deal more."

Accordingly, when Rufus went in, and the door was closed, the outlaw stole along until he had obtained a position under the window.

Fortunately for him Divine had left a crack there with reference to the sounds he had been hearing in the town, earlier on in the evening. Sounds could come out as well as go in, and the conversation which followed had an unsuspected listener.

"Going out to get the news, is he? Good enough for me," thought Columbo.

"I can take a little scout on my own account, and still get back to hear his report. Strikes me there is something in this that can be worked to advantage. If this villainous old rascal don't belong to the rustlers or the robbers he ought to be of one or the other. I wonder if I will not have a need for him? I can tell better, perhaps, after Billy comes back with the news."

He vanished almost in the wake of the landlord, but returned a few minutes before him, and again heard all that was said.

"Humph! I was afraid they had not the nerve to follow when they knew with whom they have to deal. Wish I could go out and stir the town up to the bottom. There is sand enough in the people if it does take considerable work to reach it. They might play my game better than the Doves. It would be better to have that sack in their hands than those of Ready Rank. They have not half so tight a gripe. Unfortunately, it would not do for me to appear to them, and

the boys will have to do the whole work, after all—if it is possible any work can be done. It will all depend on how far a flight Ready Rank intends to take. I still think he will not go far. Of that, though, I must be certain. If he is really off for good no Dove can ride within sight of him. I must know before I bring them to the front."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DOVES IN THE CAGE.

HOWEVER successful he may have been in picking up information Captain Columbo did not appear to the encamped outlaws, though they waited for him at the rendezvous fully an hour later than he had had ordered.

Then Hambleton assumed command in earnest.

"No use to wait longer. We will never see anything of the captain until he has located the rustlers, and that may take all day, or longer. If they have made a straight break for 'way back he will want to be sure of it, and if they have gone into a camp he will wait to get the points so he can lead us straight to it. We'll get back to headquarters, and make ourselves comfortable till he comes."

That was the address Hambleton made, and in short order he had the men on the move.

They were still quite a distance from the stronghold, and though they had been resting for a time they trudged back after the dogged fashion of men who were tired.

So far, they had met no one, nor had they expected to. Pursuit was not probable; and it was seldom any one save themselves penetrated the wilds which lay in this direction.

As they advanced the way became rougher. Mounted men on that trail would have had a hard time of it; and it was but little better for pedestrians. Only that it cut off some miles they would hardly have held to it.

Tired enough were all hands as they approached the end of their journey, and there would have been a good deal of straggling had Hambleton allowed it.

It was only on general principles he kept the ranks closed up, for he had no thought of danger. It was the most disagreeable of surprises when there came from in front of them the ringing cry:

"Halt, and hands up!"

The Black Doves had given that same hail often enough to understand its meaning. If it had not come from a point where their sentinels would not be they might have thought it was a jest, and treated it accordingly; but there seemed too much of stern earnest about it to dally long before making up their minds to obey, or resist.

A few hands went up on the instant, but Hambleton and the greater part of the men took to cover wherever it could be most conveniently found, and then peered around to measure the strength of the enemy.

"Oh, we have you very foul!" continued the same voice, and there was a laugh in its tone which the speaker could not conceal.

"You needn't look behind you. We just number two to your one, and half are in front, and half in rear. If you try to move, down you all go. Every man on our side shoots a perfect string; and you men can't shoot for a cent."

"If you think so come out and try it!" yelled back Hambleton, who was vainly peering around to get a glimpse of the speaker.

"We gave you all the chance we are going to back in the Flat. It's our turn now, and if we open our guns there will not be a man of you left to know what hurt him."

"Who are you, then; and what do you want?"

Hambleton began to have a suspicion of whose hands they were falling into, but was not sure, and thought it best to temporize, anyhow.

"You oughtn't to ask that question; but it won't do any hurt to tell you that Ready Rank and his rustlers are behind the bushes, and when they tell you to come down or go down they mean every word of it."

"Not doubting your meaning a bit, I am not so sure of the truth of what you say. You may be two to our one; but we only have your word for it. If you are, the Black Doves can give a good account of themselves before they go out of the damp."

"Damp nothing. Man alive, if we had meant anything of that kind the undertaker would have been measuring you for your coffin! The truth is, we stepped in to visit you, and found you weren't at home, so we waited till you turned up. It's very important business we have with you, and you don't want to waste any more time over the preliminaries. Give them the whistle, boys, so they can see there is a crowd. After that, if they don't surrender make ready."

On every side ear-splitting whistles arose, and it was not hard for the Black Doves to perceive they had dropped into the worst kind of an ambushade. Hambleton saw the game was against them.

"You have the crowd there, sure enough.

Now, what do you want? There ought to be no fight between us as long as the pot can't call the kettle black."

"Of course there ought not to be; and there was where you made the mistake, opening up the ball, back in town."

"Then, what in thunder do you mean, palavering around here all day?"

"Come out into the open and meet us like men. If you are Ready Rank you ought to know there are enough on your trail without stirring up the Black Doves, who are willing enough you should pass by on the other side."

"True for you, if things were not exactly what they are. But we don't altogether trust you, and don't intend to throw away any chances. I have found it will be convenient to stop here a few days, and while I do I intend you to be my guests. For fear of any trouble with fire-arms, and the like, I have decided it will be a good plan to take care of yours for you until you need them again. Step out into the open and drop your belts in a pile. I assure you there will be no harm done to you after that as long as there is no foolishness. We will take you inside of the fortifications, and feed you on milk and honey—or whatever you have been accustomed to—and turn you all loose when the time comes for us to leave."

"And if we don't?"

"Then down you go. Make ready!"

In the moment of breathless suspense which followed, the Black Doves could hear the clicking of hammers all around them, and knew it was no use to stand up against the enemy they could not see.

"Hold on, then! We are coming!"

Hambleton stepped out, until he reached the spot which appeared to be indicated, dropped his belt to the ground, and then elevated his hands. The rest of the men did the same.

"Some sense in you after all, though you are mighty late in finding it. Now, step off a dozen paces with your hands up, and when you all get in line we will know what to do with you."

One after another the Doves followed the example of their temporary leader.

"Now, forward march! You know the way, and when we get around to the castle, we will give you quarters where you can make yourself comfortable until we are ready to evacuate. Mighty glad am I that it has turned out so well. I was afraid I would have to drill some of you before I could bring the rest to reason."

Ready Rank had suspected the Doves would not be inclined to give up their booty without another effort to obtain it, and this was the best way to treat them to insure his safety while he remained in the neighborhood. He could take care of them a great deal better inside than outside of the retreat; and there were too many to slaughter without an actual necessity.

It was a hard pill for the Black Doves to swallow, and yet they submitted more gracefully than they would have done had they thought the men who had ambushed them were officers of the law, or a vigilant posse from the Flat. In that case it is more than likely they would have fought to the death.

The laying and springing of the trap took some time, so that the day was well advanced before all were back once more in the retreat.

Once there and scant ceremony was used with Hambleton and his men. They were marched off to an inner nook in the *cul-de-sac*, and a guard of half a dozen men placed across the narrow opening.

Ready Rank had other business more important than looking after the prisoners. The man who was simply known as Jack generally had to attend to all the odds and ends of matters, and he took charge of them, after they were once within the valley, and marched them off to the place allotted to them during the stay of the rustlers.

"Now, don't be makin' any mistake," was his caution, given with the most pleasant smile he could call up to his battered face.

"We love yer all jest ther same ez ef you war brothers, an' wouldn't hev no difficulty fur a dollar. We ain't got anything in fur you, an' ef we seen yer war in danger from Paddy's Flat, er any other gang ov outsiders more brash than pious, we'd fight fur yer tell ther last gasp—ef Capt'n Rank sed so. Take it easy an' joy yer-selves. It won't be long."

"But, see here! Is this the way to treat a long-lost brother, when he comes back to the old homestead? Why, blame it! This is our lay-out. If you had wanted to come in on a visit all you had to do was to say so, and we would have given you the best we had, if we robbed ourselves. 'Pears to me this is spreading it on too thick."

"Thar's brothers; an' thar's other brothers. These hyer are ther other brothers, I reckon. Ef we must, we're just ez ready ter slaughter ther 'hull outfit ez kin be. Thar's ther dead line. On that side ov it are peace an' comfort, all you kin eat an' drink, an' safe tell ther outside world kin eat ther bigness through ther rustlers. On this side ov it are death an' destruction. You kin hev yer own way; but ef yer selects ther wrong side ov ther line ther boys'll shoot, an' that's ther end ov it."

"And how long will we have to stay cooped here?" asked Hambleton.

"Tell thar's a change in ther pro-gram, blast yer onreasonable pickters!"

And with this lucid answer Jack turned away, leaving them to the uncertainty of their fate.

"Say! Where is Hawk?" exclaimed Hambleton, suddenly, turning to a man who had been lounging in one corner when the main body of the Doves filed in, and whom he had just recognized as one of the few Doves who had been left on guard at the retreat.

"What are you doing here, and what has become of Billy?"

"I'm hyer, I reckon, fur the same reason you are, 'cause I hev ter be. Will'um bez passed in his checks on account ov not keepin' his eyes peeled, an' Hawk, I reckon, are ther on'y one ez will come out jaybird."

"Hawk, the infernal, soft-headed mullet! How did he get away?"

"Warn't took et all—not ez a Black Dove. They rounded him up with ther other prees'ners, an' he kin be hev'n' one of ther best bedrooms, while we're lyin' 'round in ther damp, sleepin' on ther rocks, an' durned lucky we don't get it ther same way Will'um did. I tho'rt once I war elected."

"An' Hawk are a-playin' off big-bug! I knowed it war a mistake w'en I fu'st seed his ugly mug among ther Doves. He wants all ther softness; an' then crawl out w'en ther' are hard lines. I wouldn't stop much ter give him away."

"Go slow on that," said Hambleton, thoughtfully. "If he is true blue he is where he can do us the most good. And if he's not he can't do any hurt. He may help us out of the ditch yet."

"Er put us all in a hole," snorted the other man who had spoken.

"I don't go much on sich, ef ther boss did think he war a big gun frum 'way back, an' wanter set him over ther heads ov better men. W'y ain't he hyer with us now?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNCLE BEDROCK FINDS HIS GUIDE.

RUFUS PRIMROSE went down into the cellar of the bank with considerable misgiving in spite of the points he had seen in favor of the scheme.

It was better than going out to meet the mob, with Bainbridge to swear a rope around his neck if need be; and he was not sure but what this mission thrust upon him might aid him somewhat, though of that he began to have graver doubts the longer he remained in the cellar.

Thinking it all over he did not pretend to understand it, but there was something suspicious in the anxiety displayed by Bainbridge to send him out to the haunt of the Black Doves as a messenger, and perhaps it was that very thought which was the strongest inducement to Primrose to accept the position.

When he went down he also had an idea he would be able to work his way out if he thought better of his venture. A few hours later, if it had not called for him meantime, the mob would be scattered in other directions, and thinking nothing at all about him, he could choose his own way and time then of going out of town, if he decided to go.

But the cellar was a stronghold, and when he looked it over by the aid of a small wax candle, which he drew from one of the pockets not examined, he decided he could dig out in a week if he began at once.

"When they struck ther du-dads they war so excited they left me all ther parryfurnally," he said, musingly, "an' I'm heeled all right fur ther job. Ef I didn't starve ter de'th while I wor makin' ther escape I could do it in course er time. But I guess I won't begin 'till I see ef they are goin' ter clean furgit me in this here kattycomb."

After having made up his mind to this he blew out his candle, replacing it carefully in his pocket, and threw himself down to slumber with the abandon which marks his class. He had been accustomed so thoroughly to the life, he could have slept through an earthquake.

It is likely he would have slept the night through had he not been awakened in the way best adapted to bring him at once to his senses.

He felt a hand on his shoulder; and with the touch his eyes were wide open.

There was a light in the cellar, where all before had been darkness, and his first idea was that Bainbridge had come to give him his supper and send him forth.

"Tuk yer own time to it, didn't yer?" he grumbled, turning over lazily.

"Might 'a' brung ther vittals some time ago, an' I'd 'a' bin all ready fur ther start; but yer kin bet yer boots I don't wander forth on a empty stomjack."

"Hlist!" was the low answer.

"If you are waiting for Thomas Bainbridge I have an idea it will be a long time till he comes. And you could have shouted yourself hoarse before any one else would have heard you. I am not sure I am doing a wise thing, but when I heard how you were fixed I thought I would take counsel with you. It may be you can help me."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Bedrock, recognizing the voice at once.

"Tho'rt you hed skipped ther camp along with

yer brother. 'Twouldn't be healthy fur either ov us ter be found colleagin' tergether. Ther gang'd think more ner ever thar war s'uthin' in thar mare's nest. What did yer come spookin' 'round hyer fur; an' how did yer git in?"

He raised up as he spoke, and sat staring at Helen Taylor, who stood over him with a lantern in her hand.

She was dressed in the boy's suit she had donned the previous night, and a monstrosity good-looking boy did she make. Altogether too good-looking for Paddy's Flat, where the average boy of her size was principally dirt, and ragged jeans!

"But we are not going to be seen together in the Flat, though I would be willing to take the risk if I saw any profit in it. I came by a way that I made; and as I said before, because I overheard enough to make me think you might be of assistance to me."

"Hol' on a bit! Hol' on! Ef you could make a way what's ther matter with Pony havin' found thar same road slightly in advance? It's a kinder bad break fur ter try ter mix up a innercent lam' like me in sich doin's. Uncle Bedrock never war a bugglar, an' he don't want ter b'gin now."

"Nonsense, man! You know as well as I that my brother had nothing to do with the robbery of the bank. Bainbridge gave you a mission to perform—do you undertake it or not?"

"Hello! Looks ez tho' you war behind ther scenes. I got ther creden'sh'ls, but I ain't sure which way I tended ter skip w'en I got outen this. I hed laid out a program las' night; but this hyer confounded bank trouble knocked it all sky high. Hev yer heard ary thing ov Mr. Stafford?"

"Perhaps; but I cannot say. I am willing to risk it that I have if you are willing to aid me. I fancy he and my brother are together, and as prisoners. If you can find the retreat of the Black Doves you will take me to them, for I am going along with you."

"Not in ez clean a face ez that. I've took one 'spectable-lookin' pusson in tow; an' yer kin see w'ot hez come ov it. You go roll in ther mud, an' tear them trowsers, ef yer wants ter hitch on with Bedrock."

In spite of her earnestness the girl laughed.

"I know I am a little too fine for a wandering Arab of the Paddy's Flat streets; but what can I do? If you can decorate me more artistically you may try your hand. The question is, will you go?"

"But, see hyer, dog-gone it! W'ot's ther Black Doves got ter do with Stafford? Er war they all wrong round at Abe's las' night, an' later on? It's Rustler Rank we or ter be scoutin' fur, unless we got ther gangs mixed."

"I am not sure I can explain, and so I will not try. I know you were to take a message to the den of the Doves, though just why I am not so certain. And I think Bainbridge has changed his mind, and intends to leave you here for the present. If you follow me out, and undertake the service, whether it is wanted or not, do you think you could find the place?"

"I kin find airy spot on this broad footstool ef I go afoot, an' don't waste no preshus minnits a-burryin'. I'll foller yer out, ef I can't go a leetle ahead, an' we kin be arg'vin' ther matter ez we go along. I've severial occashuns remark-ed that w'en a woman takes a noshun in her head 'thout givin' a reason she's apt ter hev a purty good one salted back ter come out with all right in ther eend. Propel, an' leave funder chin-music fur outside."

The suggestion that the banker intended to leave him in the lurch was not a surprise; but it brought back to him the doubts he had already felt. Knowing the hour was far later than he expected to be called on, he had no hesitation in leaving, even though he had been somewhat curious to know what other instructions he would receive if he was really sent out to search for Captain Columbo, who had so long been able to keep out of the way when sought for.

The way out had no reference to the business part of the bank, as it was through the only window, which had been guarded by shutters of the thickest kind of plank.

This was carefully closed once more, and the lock on the shutters replaced, so that if Bainbridge made any examination it would be a mystery to him how his prisoner escaped.

"An' thar ain't nothin' bin heard all day ov Pony, ner yit ov Mr. Stafford?" was the first question of the man of rags, as they moved away from the spot.

"Nothing by the general public."

"That means yer hez hed a leetle inside informashun?"

"I have told you already all I can for the present. I am acting blindly, on a woman's intuition that I understood what I heard."

"Then, blame me, ef I don't act on it, too. Let me fix yer up a bit, leetle pard, an' we'll try it on, though I 'spect it won't work ez well ez it men't."

Uncle Bedrock had some genius for disguise, and he made Helen a good deal more like a gamin in looks without much effort. While remodeling her clothing, or the jacket, at least, and applying dirt after an artistic fashion to her face, he explained the only chance he had of

being able to conduct her to the retreat of the Doves.

"Ef he comes ter time thar ort ter be a messenger from ther camp ter take Bainbridge's ans'r. Even ef he's thar he'll be apt ter lay low tell he gits a glimps' ov us. Ef he don't like our looks we may not see him, arter all. But we'll try it on an' see. Ef we kin ketch his ear we'll be all right. I got ther pass-word."

"If he is there we will find him, though I am not so sure he will be willing to convoy us to the spot we wish to reach."

"Don't be skeered ov that. It's a quesshun ov ther drop, an' if he tries ter squirm, blame ef I don't take him inter camp at ther Flat, an' let ther boys ellervate him ez a thunderin' fool! But w'ot yer goin' ter do w'en yer gits thar are w'ot gits me."

"And will me, too, until we arrive. I will be guided by circumstances; but something tells me I can be of use."

Once well out of the town and they pursued their way in silence. Bedrock knew the spot which had been appointed in the letter as a rendezvous, and approached it carefully. He had already made up his mind it was not on a trail leading toward the camp of the outlaws, and regretted the extra labor the fact involved.

"Thar's ther spot in ther nigh distans'," he whispered at length.

"Now then, fur me ter saunter along keerness like, an' w'issel 'Days of Absens.'"

As he executed the maneuver he had his eyes fixed on the tree under which was to be the trysting-place.

To his surprise he heard a voice behind him. He had not thought it possible he was passing any one as he came along, but the individual was certainly there, and lying low.

"What's the good word, pardner? Can't you stop an' give a man the news?"

At once Primrose knew where to look for the man. He was lying at full length a little off the trail as he went by, though now he was reclining on one elbow. It was just about the game Bedrock would have played, which made it the more disgusting that he had not dropped to it sooner.

"Yer needn't git out yer gun!" exclaimed the tramp, who fancied he saw a movement of the free hand.

"I'll tell yer all I kin, an' ef that ain't ernuf you'll hev ter go to ther Doves fur ther balance, an' ef yer don't carry rocks I reckon they won't talk."

The words of recognition had passed between them, and the fellow jumped up as if satisfied there was no trouble on hand.

"Go on, then, pardner. You don't look like the sort of man one would expect to meet around here just now, but I guess you are the right stripe. Go on with the news. It's not altogether healthy loafing around here, and I want to get a move on as soon as possible, if you have no package for me to carry."

"Nary packidge, old man. Nothin' but a letter; an' I'm a-freezin' tight ter that tell I kin hand it over to ther boss hisself."

"But, see here, that won't work! If you have a letter hand it over. I'll put it where it will do the most good, and come back for you later on—if the boss says so."

"Not accordin' ter Hoyle. W'ot the letter don't tell I've got ter say, an' ef I ain't there how kin I say it?"

"Sorry ter disappoint you, pardner, but you are not the first fellow that tried to come in and found he was not good looking. Fork over, and no more nonsense. The boys over there are getting impatient, and they may take a notion this is no fair deal, and act accordin'."

"Let 'em noshun ez much ez they hev a mind to. I'm a-takin' on meself, an' you're ther thing I mean. I got ther 'dvantidge, mister; now, let's talk a leetle plainer. 'F I pull trigger ther fellers 'll be mighty much satisfied. Sabbe?"

By a quick movement Bedrock slung his right hand around so the weapon in it covered the man by the unexpected movement.

"I an' my 'prentice hev ther hull contract fur openin' negoshyashuns, an' we're goin' ter do it our way or not er tall. You ain't afear'd ov one ole man, an' a whipper-snapper ov a boy. Ef yer ain't, lead ther way. Ef yer be, we'll take yer right inter Paddy's Flat, an' show yer off fur a dog-goned fool."

As he spoke the boy who had dropped to the rear as they approached the spot, slid again to his side.

"You let," he whined, "whar Uncle Bedrock goes thar I'm g'wine too."

The man looked from one to the other, and then, with a sudden change of resolution, exclaimed:

"All right, then! I'll take you both, but if any harm comes of it blame yourselves."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PRIMROSE CALLS A DECIDED HALT.

THE outburst from the man was frankly spoken, and Uncle Bedrock did not doubt his sincerity, though he thought he would not allow himself to be killed through over-confidence in the speaker.

Primrose had pointed out to his companion as

they came along that the way would belong and tire some, and must offer opportunities, sooner or later, for foul play if any was intended, but as she was willing to run the risks he did not intend to decline them, though he had already promised himself he would keep a bright lookout for danger.

Accordingly, he asked for no pledges; and made no sign that he doubted the good faith of his guide. Without further delay the three set out together.

The man was not altogether unwilling to indulge in conversation after they were once fairly started.

"Thought once the old fool wasn't going to come down to his milk according to his orders. He had a gang scouting around all afternoon. I guess, though, you know as much about that as I do."

"Notter thing, pard; notter thing. He kept that part dark, 'cause I might not ov keered ter round up on ther bo'nets' nest ef I knowed he'd bin tryin' ter stir it up with a long pole."

"What of that? It strikes me he was pretty hard up for material when he picked you up to go between."

"Material war s'kass, an' that's a fact. He tried a couple others ez war better lookin', but they wouldn't come in. They's lots ov 'em ez would kerry a letter ter whar I met you; but they wouldn't go no funder."

"Then, why in the name of wrath, didn't he come himself?"

"That would be wu'st ov all. Ef Columbo wants twenty thousand fur a slip ov a gal, w'ot would he want fur a full-grown man, ov Thomas Bainbridge's bigness? Sabbe?"

"You are right, there. It might not be safe for him to go into the nest; but what was the sense of his sending anybody at all? A 'no,' or a 'yes,' would have put the thing straight as a string. And most anybody would have done to send word by, when and where he would be around with the money."

"You 'pears ter know a heap more about things than a high private jin'rally does, an' mebbe it ain't no use ter be tellin' yer ther rest. Fur fear yer won't sleep ter night, though, I kin jast inform yer thet it are our duty ter inspect ther goods, an' see ef it's in tradin' condish. Then, when I hev talked over a bit with ther innercent victim I'm goin' back ter tell him ter stay out, er ter make ther raise ef it takes ther wheels off'n his feenanshual instertut-shun."

This was a settler, and for a time there were no more questions asked, but the three plodded on in silence, until a new idea seemed to strike the man.

"Say, it looks kind of funny that you didn't strike the old man for a mount. You must be fond of tramping. It's a long road, and you'll be pretty well fagged out by the time you get there, to say nothing of the journey back."

"That's true ez gospel; but then, w'ot would yer have? Put a beggar on hossback an' whar would he ride to? Yer see, bosses hev a val'y, an' they do say w'otever Columbo gits his fingers ag'in are mighty apt ter stick. We ain't givin' him a dollar more ner he asks fur, in no event."

"Well, it is you who is to run the risk, and you know what you are going for. If there is foul play behind the move, Columbo is the man to see through it. Guess I'm keeping in the line of orders. What you want to wring that boy into the thing for is more than I can see, however."

"Part ov his educashun, can't yer understand? Ther chainece ov a lifetime ter git a glimps' ov a outlaw on his native beath, ter say nothin' ov w'ot he'll learn 'bout how ter kerry on sich negosheashuns. An' Dick an' me never parts. We're thar an' tergether, every time. 'F I war ter go inter ther thing 'thout Dicky I'd lose me luck, sure. He's ther mascott ez kerries me through ther hard places."

If it had been light enough to take it in, the look Primrose cast at the boy would have been sufficient to convince a greater doubter than this outlaw, even, of the close relationship between the two.

The words, however, were sufficient. The man shrugged his shoulders and dropped the subject, puzzling though it may have been to him.

Dicky might have been differently affected if he had not found enough to do in keeping up with the taller pedestrians. At first, the seeming boy got along over the ground as spryly as either of the others; but eventually the journey began to tell. The way was rougher than had been counted on. Bedrock began to give anxious glances at his young companion, for he could see the task had been underrated.

He was a little surprised, however, when, unexpectedly, the guide called a halt.

"You have found your way pretty close to the nest of the Black Doves; but it is just as likely you have found a good deal more, which you never intended to."

"Which means?"

"You have found a resting-place where you won't be troubled about your board and lodging for some days to come. You seem like a jolly old rascal, and I should be sorry if you came to any harm, but it is about this way. If you

once get in you won't be likely to get out until we Doves have had a good fair start."

"But, blame it, I kerry a white flag! Don't Columbo reespect ther sanxity ov a envoy extryor'nary?"

"He respects nothing but his own safety, when that is in question; and would be a fool if he did. If he let you out to lead the town back to the spot the boys would have a word or two to say. They would follow on and cut your throat before you knew what was coming."

"Good glory! How bloodthirsty!"

"Don't make a jest of it. If you don't like going ahead there is time yet for you to give me the letter and get away before you get deeper in the mire."

"Thankee. Yer w'iter than I tho't ye war at fu'st; but we go ther hull hog er none. Lead on, most noble rover."

"Sorry, but I dare lead you no further, or my own neck might be in danger. I can only give you the points, and leave you to work your own way in."

"Give 'em, then, an' don't worry fur my sake. Yer uncle Bedrock are all right, all'sers bin right, an' all'sers g'wine ter be right. W'ot's ther password?"

"For you there is none. I will go ahead and speak a good word for you. Then, you follow straight on, ten yards or so, and you will strike a trail which will lead you in to the outpost. Tell your own story, and do the best you can."

"I kin tell story enough ter shock a grind-st'un. That part don't worry me a bit; but I ain't so sure about that aforesaid trail. W'ot ef I couldn't find it? Jest you put me onto it, an' then you kin take yerself off ez fast ez you wants to, but you ain't a-leavin' me hyer. You hear me?"

With the facility he had so often shown for catching the drop, Primrose turned on the man, who was already trying to glide away. The sharp click sounded louder than his words, for Rufus was careful not to raise his voice above a whisper.

"Don't be a fool! You must want to wreck us both," answered the man, halting, however.

"Keep quiet and I will put you on the trail, though it will be against orders, and if it is found out may cost me dear. Mind, you are not to give me away."

"Lead on, then, ef ye'r g'wine ter. An' ef yer don't hev a move on mighty soon I'll be a-kerryin' yer—an' you won't be doin' no kickin'."

"This way, then."

The man might be acting in good faith, but Bedrock had his suspicion, and kept a close watch on his every movement as well as he could in the uncertain light.

Half a dozen paces or so were taken and then the trail was there sure enough, but just then the guide gave an ear-piercing whistle, and then sprung to one side. In another moment he would have been out of sight and away, had it not been for the silent Dicky, of whom the fellow had not been taking sufficient notice.

It was not the place to use weapons except as a last resort. Bedrock would hardly have risked a shot, and the man was already beyond his reach.

But just then the would-be fugitive struck a round little ball that had flung itself directly in his way, and over he went, his head striking the ground while his heels were up in the air.

Before he could recover, Bedrock was on him like a mountain.

"Pears like ez though thar war some shenanagin arter all," he whispered.

"Dicky, boy, ef yer hev a extry wipe, er a bit ov string thet kin be relied on, han' it over quick, an' stuff ther nozzle ov yer shooter inter this fool-mouth ov hissen tell I kin git him fixed. I wanter put him so he can't run away, an' see w'ot'll be ther consequences."

The suggestion was acted on so immediately there was no chance for remonstrance or explanation. Before he knew it, almost, the man was bound in such a fashion he would at least be helpless for a few moments.

Then Bedrock caught his young companion by the arm, and hurriedly fell back for a few paces, and then led the way beyond the trail, and upward among the rocks which overlooked the spot.

"Notter bit too soon," chuckled the tramp, as he caught the sound of advancing footsteps.

"Mebbe I can't see through a mill-stan'; but I'm onter that game, you kin bet—with a big B."

Soon, there was the sound of a floundering fall, followed by some words not at all pious. Other voices joined in; there was a little flare of light while the face of the bound man was examined; some exclamations of wonder; and after that the man was carried away, evidently a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIX.

READY RANK SELECTS HIS MESSENGER.

"My child, it may be that I am getting beyond my depth, when I interfere in such matters. I generally stick to plain pistol practice, and what can be made of it. But I have come into possession of some remarkable facts which

look as though they ought to have money in them, and I am going to run the risks. If there was twenty thousand in this thing for Captain Columbo there ought to be as much for Ready Rank, and I want to talk it over."

The chief of the rustlers had been having a busy day of it.

The informal examination of his prisoners had taken some time; the capture of the Black Doves more. Then he had to look after the safety of his position; send scouts to bring him word of what was going on outside; and finally, there was the loot, snatched from the Black Doves the previous night, to be looked over.

The counting of the money was the least part of the operation, though it gave untold satisfaction. There were certain papers which looked at first glance as though they might be of more value to their owner than the coin.

When he had, as he thought, digested the papers, he made a call on his lady prisoners. The fact that Lieutenant Hawk, and the two men whom he had captured at the Flat were within hearing distance made no difference to him, though he did mutter something about "cursed carelessness" as he entered.

Alta looked up with a woebegone smile on her face. She had not the command over her feelings of the day before. Captivity and uncertainty as to her fate were having their effect on her nerves.

"I tried to explain both to you and to Captain Columbo that no such amount as that could be expected for my release, and had you not come on the carpet, by this time he would have been aware of the fact."

"That may all be as far as the worthy gentleman known in Paddy's Flat as Thomas Bainbridge, is concerned. I am not sure he would be, or rather would have been, greatly grieved if you never came back at all."

"What do you mean, sir? I am perfectly satisfied my father would go to the limit of his means to save me from such vile inconvenience if there was no other escape; but I know well enough how he has become tied up in investments, so that it is impossible on such short notice to command any such sum."

"The old gentleman has more cash on hand than you think for—or had when the Black Doves made their swoop. But there is one thing you seem to be a little off about. Are you so sure Thomas Bainbridge is your father?"

"Sir?"

"Don't be too indignant over a plain question to give it an answer. I am in earnest, because I really have my doubts."

"And I, sir, have none at all; neither has Thomas Bainbridge. The question is an insult."

Ready Rank looked down thoughtfully, and caressed his long mustache. He cared nothing for the anger his suggestion had aroused. Indeed, he was rather glad to see it. It confirmed him in the belief of the value of his discovery—provided Thomas Bainbridge had the command of the wealth he was pretty sure had an existence.

"There is something about this neither of us entirely understands. Perhaps Columbo did when he got ready for this swoop, but he is not here to give us the advantage of his wisdom. The best plan would be to follow in the line he has marked out, until we see our way clear to some other course. I believe he communicated with Bainbridge, senior?"

"I have reason so to believe," simply answered Alta, then pressing her lips tightly together to keep back any rash addition she might feel like making.

"So I supposed, but I do not understand why he did not wait for an answer. He is not in the gang as gathered up here, and no one seems to know, or be willing to tell, what became of him. It may be he was dropped in the little scrimmage in town, but I hardly think so."

"It seems to make no difference to me, except that it has delayed my rescue by at least a day."

"I was not thinking about you at all, my child. I was wondering how he had proceeded in the matter. Probably he sent one of his men as a messenger. If he did, it might not be healthy to try the same game. I think the only plan is to utilize this gentleman. I thought of that from the first, though it seems a pity to throw him away, when there may be a few dollars in him."

Alta opened her mouth to say that the gentleman alluded to was one of the Black Doves, and the identical individual who had accomplished her capture; but she thought better of it. There was something about the outlaw that made her believe he was willing to assist her if it lay in his power. She remained silent.

"Would you be willing to use him as a messenger? I can explain to him the position a great deal clearer than I can, or will, to you. We are here to-day; but I don't expect to be here to-morrow, by a long sight. The further off you get from the home-base the longer the run back will be, and it will be a great nuisance all around to have to take you along."

Alta uttered a little cry of dismay. The nest of the Doves was bad enough, but she began to realize there might be worse.

"Yes, yes! Send him, if you think he can be

trusted. Any man would do his best to aid a woman in such a plight—and I can ask no more."

"Very well. He shall be sent in; and there will be a guard, to take him blindfold through the worst of the journey. We are not as much afraid of his losing the way out, as being able to find it back, if he takes the notion to come with his friends. Then, there will be a lookout on the town, and if there is any sign of a move in force, a smoke signal can tell us all about it; and, by the holy maverick, I'll hang the whole outfit! Ready Rank has done worse things, and is just as good a man now as he ever was."

Rank had the reputation of being ready with the rope, and Alta shivered as she felt this might be no idle threat, though she retained by a mental struggle the wonderful outward calmness with which she had so far met misfortune.

"If you chose to make me responsible for the mistakes of my friends what could I do but utter my protest? Send your messenger, and be done with it."

"You wish to know the worst. Very well. Your friend shall be started on his way. After that I shall have something more to say to you on the subject I have already hinted at."

Lieutenant Hawk had the advantage of hearing every thing said, so he had time to prepare himself for what was to come. He had adhered to his line of saying as little as possible to the rustler chief, or any one else save Alta. And to her he had only spoken a few words of encouragement, and even those were but illy received.

Rank was curt enough with him.

"Do you want to save your life?" he asked, after a fashion which left no doubt of his earnestness.

"If it can be done decently," was the cool response.

"Then you want to listen to your orders, and make no mistake about obeying them. I am going to send you in to confer with Mr. Bainbridge, and there will be something to explain about the change in the situation, and all that. You can't go far wrong when you just tell him what you have seen."

"And which I will scarcely be likely to forget."

But it is unnecessary to follow the line of action laid down by the rustler chief, as it has already been indicated. In the end Hawk was turned over to his escort, with his hands bound behind him, and a bandage over his eyes, ready for a move on the Flat.

After that Ready Rank returned to Alta.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Raymond Trainor?" was his question, as he halted by the side of the girl.

"Never," was the ready answer.

She did not notice that at the question the young man known as Pony Taylor raised his head slightly, and seemed to be listening with an intentness greater than he had before displayed, or that Stafford gave a start.

"I was in hopes you could give me some little enlightenment. At present I am all in the dark whether you are Thomas Bainbridge's daughter, and the man in town is Trainor; or, whether you are Trainor's daughter, and he is Bainbridge, sure enough."

"My father is Thomas Bainbridge, sir, and no other!" exclaimed Alta, hotly.

"So you think, but if you are right in the one thing you are probably wrong in the other. It's an infernal mystery, anyhow."

"Excuse me for interrupting, but you mentioned the name of Trainor. I am interested in obtaining particulars in regard to a man who was known by that name a score of years ago, and who died, leaving a son, or a daughter, I am not positive which."

The interruption came from Mr. Stafford. One would have thought he had enough to do thinking of his own affairs, which were in the same unsettled state the interview with Ready Rank had left them in.

"Much obliged for the question, because you may be able to furnish me with a reason for the muddle I am trying to solve. There must be more in it than a beggarly ten or twenty thousand, or a man of your resources would never come down here to put it straight. Speak up! What do you know about Trainor?"

"Well—er—I spoke in the heat of the moment, and without thinking. The strangeness of the thing carried me away. Perhaps I had better say nothing more on the subject. It is simply a business concern, in which you can have no interest."

"Yes, but you *will* talk!" fiercely growled the rustler.

"By heavens! We will have the whole truth out of you before we go a step further. You may as well learn first as last that when I crack the whip everybody has to jump around."

"It is hardly necessary to be violent. The simple fact is that some twenty years ago a man by the name of Raymond Trainor had the title of a mine in which I am interested. If I mistake not he had the title to another claim which lay alongside of it, to which now there are two claimants. It would be worth while for me to know in which direction he actually passed

his title. The knowledge might rest with his family?"

"What do the records say on the subject?" snarled the captain.

"Unfortunately, they have been burned."

"I believe all that to be an infernal lie, and I'll have the truth, or leave you in no condition to tell it!" exclaimed Rank, and turning, he gave the whistle which brought his henchman.

As if in answer, and yet rather soon, Jack came bustling up.

"Excuse me, captain, but we got another of the Black Doves. Caught him outside, an' ther boys want ter know what ter do with him."

"Hang him and be done with it!" shouted Rank, angry beyond reason at being thus troubled.

"If this thing keeps on we'll have three States and all the Territories cooped here, and there won't be men enough to feed them."

"Hangin' goes, ef you say so; but this seems to be one of the highflyers, and ther queer thing war he gave ther whistle that brung us to him, an' we found him tied up, tight ez bricks."

"Queer it was. Bring him in here, and we will see what he is like."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MAN OF TWO DISGUISES.

THERE was a reason why Ready Rank changed his mind so suddenly upon hearing Jack's explanation. He had not thought of it at first, but there was only one of the Black Doves unaccounted for, and that was Captain Columbo, himself.

He had gleaned that much from a careful examination, made, in order to get an understanding of the position, after he found the spot he had believed exclusively his own lurking-place appropriated by others.

He knew, of course, that every precaution would be taken, or he might have gone out to order a more thorough examination of the neighborhood, and redoubled vigilance lest there might be a force at hand, which had captured and then dropped the Black Dove. Looking up he saw the guard over the prisoners was standing before him. He had been summoned by the whistle of the chief, but the latter had now another use for him.

"Cover these men with your guns, and see they stay where they are, even if you have to drop them. I have something else to do but watch them, and if they think they see a chance they may try to slink off."

"Covered they are. If there is any fun going you can bet they won't have a hand in it."

Ready Rank did not appear to notice the answer, but fixed his eyes on a paper he held in his hand. He was still studying it when Jack returned with the new prisoner, holding him with a tight gripe on one shoulder, while another rustler shoved him along, clutching with either hand his neck and waist.

"Hyer's yer Black Dove, an' a mighty harmless one he looks—pluck of a rabbit, an' no voice at all."

Rank looked the prisoner over. The bands which Bedrock had placed upon him were still there, and his face was shaded by the mask, without which the Doves were seldom seen.

"Look up here, old man!" said the rustler, with the cheerful tones he generally used in beginning a conversation.

"Your friends all went to supper some time ago, and we were wondering what had become of you. Looks as though you had been in trouble. How did you get away?"

The Black Dove gave a quick, stealthy glance around, which took in captives as well as captors, and then responded in the deep voice which Alta well remembered:

"One of the fortunes of war. I was trying to pass over to you a man who needed looking after, and he turned the tables on me. That is all."

"Ah, wanted to shift the responsibility, did you? And the party?"

"A detective, who was as likely to be looking for you as for me."

"And don't you think, my dear boy, that if it was a case where killing was necessary, it would only have been kind and generous of you to do the work yourself?"

"If one man could get away with him, perhaps I might have tried it on. But that is neither here nor there. You are Ready Rank, if I mistake not; and I would ask for a private conference. It will be worth your while to listen to me, but I do not care to speak before so large an audience."

"That is something else. If you are Captain Columbo, I might be willing to listen. Otherwise I propose to do all the talking, except where you talk for me. And I don't care who hears me."

"I am Captain Columbo, if it will be any satisfaction for you to hear me admit it."

"You say. Here! Miss Bainbridge! Look this man over and see if you can recognize him."

"It is Captain Columbo," she exclaimed, with a shudder, as she met his gaze fixed fully upon her.

"I know him by his eyes!"

"And who, then, is this?"

By a quick motion he snatched the mask from

the face of Columbo, and revealed a full countenance.

With a braveness born of feminine curiosity, Alta once more looked at the face, which, save the eyes, was entirely strange to her.

"Still Captain Columbo, I suppose, though never before did I see him without a mask. Indeed, to my knowledge, I have seen him but once outside of this view."

"It may be, and yet—"

Another deft movement of the rustler's hand, and another mask dropped from the face of Columbo. Eyes, countenance, and all, peeled away before the touch of Ready Rank, and the captain of the Black Doves stood revealed quite a different man.

"Ah, you recognize him now!"

The rustler looked curiously at Alta, who was staring at the man of two disguises.

"My father!" she exclaimed, in a piping scream, and then sunk backward into the arms of Mr. Stafford!

"The young lady is only a little excited, and will be herself in a moment. Don't make any fuss over her and she will be all right," said Rank without offering to move, though perhaps he saw Stafford had forestalled any assistance of his own.

"And now, old man, suppose you open up," he continued, turning to his latest made prisoner.

"There is some deep game about all this, and we want to know the rights of it. This young lady is not your daughter."

"Of course not. What sort of an infernal fool do you take me for?"

"Not so much of a fool as a bad man from 'way back. Then, will you tell the court and jury whose daughter she really is?"

"Thomas Bainbridge ought to be her father, or there has been a bigger mistake than I generally make, when I set in to do a stroke of business!"

"Then, who are you?"

"Oh, I am Captain Columbo, at your service."

"But, who is Thomas Bainbridge?"

"A gentleman down in Paddy's Flat, whom I intended to fleece out of twenty thousand, more or less, to insure the return of his daughter."

"It will not go down, my friend. We understand, without your telling us, that you engineered this little game, but you hardly intended to rob yourself. The girl has recognized you, so you may as well make a clean breast of it, before we have to put on the screws."

Captain Columbo shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no accounting for tastes. The young lady has probably tired waiting for the gentleman at the Flat to make a move, and has concluded to try a new deal. I suspect, really, that she is a little daft, and has detected a resemblance which does not exist."

"You have cheek, at all events, though I cannot see what good you think it will do to show its full breadth. If I had not suspected you already, the words of the young lady would have been sufficient to convince me. It may be embarrassing for you to speak of certain matters in the presence of a young lady who has been thinking herself your daughter, and if so we can grant you a private interview. But, speak you will have to."

"You are as bald a fool as she is. I laid out a neat little game, that would have put the butt end of the wealth of Paddy's Flat into the pockets of the Black Doves, and every move had succeeded right along, when you had to come into our way. You got our prisoners, and you got our booty—every dime that was in the vaults of the bank when we raided them. That ought to satisfy you, without occupying our headquarters, and trying to set up on me a cross of some kind, which I do not understand, but which has a foul game in it to make money. You say what you please, I am done talking."

"Pretty good string, that, for one breath, and I don't wonder you want to rest a little; but all the same you will have to get a little closer to our mutton. When a plum drops into a man's mouth by chance it's a sign it's worth the eating."

When Alta fell back, Rank was so sure she had fainted he paid no further attention to her. Stafford could hold her in his arms, and Aunt Matilda minister to her. There was a jug of water in the cave-room, and for the present nothing more could be needed.

Alta had not fainted, however.

She knew who it was who caught her, and had no objection to resting in his arms for a moment or so, while she hid her face with her hands, and tried to recover her scattering senses.

After a little, she looked up, trying through the mist over her eyes to see the man she had called, father.

There was a look on that face she had never seen there before; but it was the face of her parent still. Could it be possible he was only pretending to be the captain of the outlaws, and had risked his life there to save her?

The thought came to her like an inspiration. It was a slender thing to pin a hope to, but she drew a long breath, and felt stronger.

She heard all his long statement; and certainly

it could not come from the lips of a man who was not telling the truth.

She listened to the threat with which Ready Rank answered it; and he appeared to be as thoroughly in earnest. Were both acting, or were either of them speaking from the heart?

Captain Columbo continued silent. His hands were still bound, for Bedrock had made a good job of it, and one the rustlers had not yet thought it worth while to undo.

"And you won't speak?" added Rank, after a moment of silence.

Columbo simply closed his lips a little tighter, and raised his head defiantly.

"Then, by the foul fiend, we'll put the screws on in earnest, and your so-called daughter shall stand by to encourage you when you grow weary! It is as much her interest as mine that is at stake. There ought to be enough in this thing for both of us. I will escort the young lady, while you guards bring him along. And fetch the others, too. They may as well understand with whom they are dealing at first as at last."

Columbo offered no resistance. He was not in condition to undertake it effectively, and did not care to make a ridiculous effort, when death was not yet staring him in the face. He went along quietly enough, and even with some curiosity to know what was coming next, though he could hardly have thought the words of the rustler an empty threat.

"I had the lay-out all ready for another purpose, but it will serve as well for you. All right! Up he rises!"

Captain Columbo was not even aware that a noose had been slipped around an ankle until he was dangling in the air, head downward.

"Now, light up the fire, and give him a little foretaste of what he is coming to! If we can't have one thing we will have to take another. It's not hard to take roast squab; and this is a little Dove, anyway."

Alta could stand it no longer.

"Hold! For heaven's sake, hold! You have not understood me! That man is not my father! How could you think so?"

"You are speaking a shade too late," said Rank, coolly.

"Of course he is not your father, though you think so. What we want is to know who he really is. Go on with the fire."

CHAPTER XXXI.

HAWK EXPLAINS THE NEW DEAL.

LIEUTENANT HAWK started out on his mission a very much amused man, if the truth had been known.

He had played his cards for all they were worth, and won more than he had expected.

At the same time, he was not exactly ready to undertake the negotiation with which he was charged, unless there was no help for it—and he hoped that somewhere on the road he would find that.

And help came when least expected, because a great deal sooner than it was looked for.

Although Ready Rank had spent no great time in preparing him for his journey to the Flat, the escort was not ready to move at once, and he stood around waiting for a little before he was mounted on a horse, and tied to his seat.

Then the mounted rustler fastened a lead-line from the mouth of Hawk's horse to his own saddle, to preclude any likelihood of escape, and was just leading the way through the pass as the scouts brought in Captain Columbo.

That matter did not concern Hawk, so far as he knew, and by the time Ready Rank found out that it did, he was supposed to be too far off to admit of recall. Perhaps, even, no thought of his envoy entered the mind of the rustler, so deeply was he interested in his newest captive.

"Don't try any tricks, till we get clear of the mountain," muttered the guiding horseman, by way of warning.

"They can't do you any good, and may kill us both. The way is mighty uncertain in spots, and that mustang of yours wouldn't care where he took us both to if he once got on the rampage."

"And that, I suppose, is the reason why I am blindfolded," thought Hawk, who knew the route almost as well as the man who was guiding him.

"After that caution I ought to be peaceable as a lamb, for I am not supposed to know just where those bad spots are. Very well. I'll let my friend continue to think so, though, after all, unless I can get myself loose, I may as well make up my mind to go on to where he is ready to set me free of his own accord—unless he sends me into the town Mazepa-like, when he gets as near as he dares go."

Such an idea had not occurred to him before, and it troubled him not a little, for he cared as little as the rustler to be seen on the streets of the Flat. Yet, that was exactly the way his entry had been planned; and it would have been the sensation of the hour, too, and it is a doubtful question whether he would have been able to make any one believe his story—or half-story—in time to save his neck. He would probably have arrived just about the right time to furnish fresh meat for a late breakfast!

All that danger was saved him, however, by

the interference of a gentleman who seemed to pass his life in getting his fingers into pies where they did not apparently belong.

When Primrose and his young companion dashed away from the spot where they had left the Black Dove bound, they went so noiselessly, and so fleetly, they were out of range or hearing of the spot before the rustlers reached it.

After that, they kept out of sight without much difficulty. There was just light enough to enable them to move around with freedom, and just shadow enough to enable them to hide with ease. Of course, if chance had been against them they would have been discovered; but chance happened to be in their favor.

"Those fellers can't play hidin'-coop wu'th a cent," said Bedrock, after a little.

"They'd sooner hev a be-ole fou't ary day then ter go snookin' 'roun' in ther bushes fur w'ot mebbe they can't find. Guess they'll go back now, an' wait fur s'uthin' else."

"But why under the sun did you take so much trouble and risk to throw that man into their hands; and why did you back out at the last moment? I followed your lead; but it looks much as though you have been deceiving me all along, and never meant to go into the den of the thieves."

"All in good time, me child; all in good time. It kinder run in my mind thar war a game set up, an' it wouldn't be healthy ter make ther visit jest yit."

"But the guide! Why trouble yourself about him? We are not compelled to follow him; why then did you not simply let him go?"

"Dicky, ye'r' cur'us ez a wooman. I war feelin' ther way. Struck me s'uthin' hed happened we didn't know too much about; an' he knowed more. Ef he war ther squar' artikel, an' ther Black Doves are inside, some ov 'em 'll be out on ther hunt ov us 'fore long. I'll wait an' see, aryhaw."

"No doubt you are correct," replied Helen, who was not by any means satisfied with the position of affairs.

"I think I can hear them coming now."

Sure enough, Bedrock could hear the footsteps when he listened, and they seemed to be made by several horses, picking their way carefully along the trail, and coming from the direction in which the outlaws' stronghold was supposed to lie.

"It's not a case fur guns, ez long ez we kin keep frum u-in' ov 'em," said the tramp, carefully selecting a couple of medium-sized stones from the ground near his feet.

"Mebbe we'll want ter be taken, an' mebbe we won't. We'll prepare fur ther wu'st."

"What foolishness are you about? If you go to tossing those things at the men who are coming we may as well give up all hope of seeing the inside of the nest, save as prisoners."

"An' ez long ez they hold ther fort guess thar would be no chainece ter see it ary other way. But you can't prezactly tell. Stuns like these are a handy thing ter have in ther fambly. Le's see w'ot they are up to. They don't seem arter us, aryhaw."

He moved up closer to the thread of a trail, and stationed himself so that he could command a fair view of an open spot, while keeping himself well in the shadow.

Helen crept up to his side. No matter how much she was disgusted with his ways, she had gone too far to allow herself to become separated from Primrose.

They did not have long to wait. The horses were coming faster, now, and soon emerged from the shadow. What they saw was a surprise; and the first thought was, that the prisoner they had left for the Black Doves was coming back under guard. There was a man tied to his saddle, his hands bound, and his head bandaged, while another man led his horse.

A second look, however, told Bedrock something else. He braced himself for an effort, and waiting a trifle longer, until the horsemen were just opposite to his position, he pitched the stone with all his might!

The missile was better than a pistol-ball. It hit the mark for which it was intended, and tumbled the man out of the saddle without the least noise. He lay on the ground, motionless as a log.

Then Bedrock rushed out and caught the free horse by the bridle.

The animal had been considerably startled, and no doubt would have dashed away had there been any delay. As it was, it required a few minutes of petting, aided by the strong hand on the bit, to render him quiet.

"Now, Dicky, take ther knife outen my hip, an' cut ther young man loose. I can't j-st let go meself 'bout runnin' some reesks. I've lost a man that way afore, an' I ain't bein' left same fashion ag'in."

The low-voiced order was rapidly obeyed. The keen-edged blade speedily cut through the thongs with ease, and soon as the hands of the prisoner were free he tore the bandage from his eyes and stared around him.

"Good heaven! You here!" he exclaimed, as his gaze rested on Bedrock.

"What under heaven and earth are you up to now?"

"Don't look like ez that war a hard kernun-

drum, viewin' ther s'cumstances ov ther case. 'Pears ez though I war gettin' a young man outen diffikilty. Jest hold on w'ile I arrange this hyer corpus, an' I'll hev more time ter talk ter you."

Bedrock was cool as you please, and examined the body lying in the trail as though there was nothing else of interest at hand.

The rock had done less damage than he had feared, and though the man was insensible, yet it did not seem his skull had been cracked, or any bones broken. With the cords taken from Hawk he proceeded to tie the fellow, taking the trouble, also, to place a gag in his mouth, though that was rather a difficult operation.

"Now, speak quick, an' no nonsense. Do yer want ter git outen this; er do yer sorter want ter linger 'roun'?"

"I want to linger, as you call it; but the sooner we get away from this particular spot the better."

"Then, I guess we may ez well send him along ther same way ez he war countin' on sendin' you. Ef they happen ter find him they kin make w'ot they please ov it. Guess they won't hit ther truth within forty rod, er tharabouts."

It was as good a scheme to dispose of the outlaw as any they could devise, since they were not desirous of having him found at the spot where he fell from his horse. At any other point the trail would be broken.

"It is a rough deal on the man, who did not seem to be a bad one of his sort; but I see nothing better, and away he goes," said Hawk, who fell to assisting Bedrock without hesitation after his first surprise was over. When the man was safely tied in his place the two horses were once more started on their journey, though it was not likely they would land anywhere near Paddy's Flat. The arms and lasso of the rustler remained behind with the victors as the spoils of war.

"Now, let us get away from this spot a little, where we can have a bit of talk. I must know what you are doing here, and what is the news from the outside world."

"All right; an', Dicky, you come along. Thar's nothin' ter be afear'd ov. This hyer are a ole side pard ov mine, ez kin be trusted; an' we'll git all ther latest from beyand."

Helen was looking dubiously at the addition to their party. If nothing worse, she was afraid he would draw them away from the business in hand. The words of Bedrock scarcely reassured her, but she followed without complaint until they finally halted in a convenient niche.

"I warn't lookin' fur you," began Bedrock, "but it j-st did me soul good when me ole eyes dropped on yer mug. I hedn't more sense than ter take a man under my wing w'ot came to ther Flat, lookin' fur Rufus Primrose, bearin' a letter ov interdoose frum Banty King. He war a gilt-edge sort er big-bug, an' I o'rt ter tok extry keer ov him; but las' night I lost him. His name war Stafford, an' I'll find him ef I chase him to ther moon an' back ag'in. You seen him?"

Hawk nodded. "He is up there, along with the rest. They have Miss Bainbridge, her female relative, the Stafford you speak of, and a young man by the name of Taylor. They had me, too, and I got out by the sheerest piece of luck that ever came my way. And the more I think of it the more I don't understand how I came to get out at all."

"Hole on a bit. Yer say, they got 'em. W'os got 'em? Looks ez though thar hed bin a new deal."

"So there has. Thought you knew it. Ready Rank, the rustler, is holding the ranch, and the Black Doves have all gone into the pen except Captain Columbo; and he missed it only because he wasn't with the gang when they were caged."

"Good thunder! An' I jest sent him in to 'em. W'ot a misfort'in'!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT THE OTHER END OF THE ROPE.

"WAIT, wait! What is Captain Columbo to me? You say that Taylor is there, in the hands of Ready Rank. Has he been recognized?"

The outlaw-lieutenant had been eying the seeming boy curiously, though so far saying nothing about him. At this interruption he uttered a low whistle of surprise.

The tones were too unmistakably feminine to be mistaken for those of the other sex.

"I see now, and I cannot say that I am glad to see, either. You had better left that part of the contract to the old man, or learned to act your part under all circumstances. I should say he has, though that will hardly make you feel any the better. They had an interview; and I think it was a stormy one. It was interrupted by the coming of the Black Doves, and so far has not been renewed."

"Then, he still lives?"

"Lives, and is likely to live until the rustler gets through with his present investigation—and that is likely to take him some time. All the while Pony is keeping up a deep thinking, and if he is equal to his reputation he may waken them all up yet."

"You know him, then?"

"By sight and reputation, yes."

"Enough! I cannot see the moments go by without doing something to help him. While we are talking here his death-warrant may have been signed. I have risked everything to be near him, and to do something, however desperate. I thought that with the aid of this man I might reach him; but he has failed me, and I appeal to you."

"Jest a holy leetle minnit," interrupted Primrose.

"I ain't throwin' off on yer half ez bad ez yer thinks. Let me an' him hev our talk out, so ez we know how things stan', an' then your turn 'll come in. I ain't fearin' fur Pony half ez much ez I be fur ther ladies in ther case, an' ef I don't guess wrong thar won't be no move made on him tell thar bez bin another raid on ther Flat, er he drops his peepers on you, ter know y r."

"Go on, then, but cut your explanations to each other as short as possible. I am burning with impatience to be at work."

She folded her arms tightly across her breast, compressed her lips, and compelled herself to keep silent while the two men finished their conversation.

What they said was commonplace enough to her. Primrose detailed the raid on the town, and the robbery of the bank, together with the suspicions that had been pointed at Taylor and himself. Lieutenant Hawk went over the departure of the Doves for their raid, and the coming of Rank and his rustlers. Very briefly everything was explained.

"That's ther way ther land lays. Alley righty! Now, w'ot's your idee ov fu'st thing ter be done?"

Bedrock appeared to be somewhat puzzled himself. There were so many complications, and such diverse interests.

"It is easy enough to say what ought to be done, but the doing of it is the difficulty," responded the other.

"The first thing for me to do would be to see to getting Columbo and his Doves out again, and on the war-path."

"What! Save that wretch!" exclaimed Helen, indignantly.

"On'y temp'rary, on'y temp'rary!" said Primrose, with a wave of his hand, as if to still her angry passions.

"An' methinks ye'r' furgittin' a bit ov advice this gent war so kind ez ter give yer, a bit ago. Ef ye'r' Dicky, be Dicky. Don't talk like arybody else. Consider ther rep'ertashun ov yer uncle if he war found gallervantin' a female in disguise onder sich cirkimstansez."

"And wretches have their uses in this world, along with honest men," added Hawk.

"Otherwise they would not be likely to have an existence. I only spoke of my duty; the rest ov you have something to say in the matter, if we are all to hang together."

"Thar ain't no back door, unbeknownst to ther rust'ers, w'ich would come in handy fur us ter view ther promised land? 'F I could see how things war a-goin' I'd know better w'ot war most 'portant'er he did."

"It strikes me that Ready Rank is as well acquainted with the ins and outs as Columbo is, and a great deal better than I am. He won't be apt to throw away any chances, either. Although he is reasonably safe here from discovery by any one but the Doves, yet he will not be taking any risks as long as he has the men to guard all sides."

"In course. But that don't answer about ther aforesaid back door. Ef ther' are one it'd be wu'th ther tryin'. Ef not, guess I'll hev ter perdoose me credenshuls, an' work me way in all straight an' regular-like."

"I am sorry to say I have not had the chance to find out as much as I desired about this nestin'-place; but I have not thrown away any chance, and it has struck me, there were several avenues which might be practical if they were left unguarded. The trouble is to find the spots in the darkness."

"That comes ov not bein' properly brung up ter a honist perfeshun. 'Tain't perzackly noon-day sunshine, but I wouldn't call this hyer darkness. It jest about suits my eyesight, an' ef yer only thinks so it won't be so blame hard on you. Let's try one ov ther spots, aryhaw."

"Perhaps it is the best we can do, if we are going to depend on ourselves for the present. It will be a hard tramp of a mile at the least, and if we miss our way there is no telling how much more."

"W'ot's miles ter me? It may be a leetle rough on Dicky, but ef he wants ter stay in ther swim he mustn't grumble. Lead on, me noble frien', an' luck go with us."

The tramp which followed was even harder than the words of Hawk indicated, and all three were pretty well out of breath when the lieutenant, in a cautious whisper, called a halt.

"Here is the spot. I stumbled acro's it one day, when I had a chance to look around a little without being too closely observed. By the aid of the lariat we can swing ourselves down, though I confess I am not so sure we will not land right into a nest of the rustlers."

"Guess we're ov age, an' ef we want ter take ther reesks it's nobody's lookout but ourn. But tter kid hed better stay outside, an' g'n us a hand up ef it gits too hot an' we want ter

leave in a hurry. She kin cover ther retreat ez well ez a better man, an' not be in half ther danger on 'count ov her bigniss. Git yer rope riddy an' let's take ther drop. We ain't no need ter fool away time a-restin'. Ready Rank'll pervide fur that ef we hev bad luck; an' ef he don't, thar's that much saved."

"Oh, there is something of a scramble downward to be taken before the lariat comes in. When we come to a tree which looks as though it had grown there for that very purpose, we will make fast to it and lower ourselves over the ledge, but we want to be careful. A little stone set to rolling here would drop down there with the sound of an avalanche."

Helen said nothing. She thought that if they expected her to take a back seat while such things were going on they would be very much mistaken. It appeared to her that she knew a great deal better what she wanted than did these two men, with their methodical ways, and lack of enthusiasm.

The three, without accident, reached the tree spoken of by Hawk. As they caught a view of the dim tracery of its branches against the sky, they redoubled their caution, and soon crouched at the edge of the ledge, the rope sliding carefully through Lieutenant Hawk's fingers until he felt the knotted end touch the rock below.

"Now, then, I'll go fu'st," whispered Rufus, and without waiting for consent or argument, he swung himself off, with an activity and strength suprising in one of his age and appearance.

Hawk would have followed, but Helen was too quick for him. She caught the rope with a firm grasp, and was gliding downward before the other had divined her intention.

"More reckless than I thought," muttered the man, hesitating for a moment, with his hand on the rope.

"There ought to be some one here to cover the retreat, or give warning in case there is discovery from the outside. The girl would have been the one to do the work, not counting the mischief she may do down there. Still, there is nothing for me to do but to go ahead. They know nothing of the ways of the place, and would be lost without me."

With this thought in his mind as a clincher, Hawk followed the lead of the two, both of whom by this time had reached the firm footing below. Without difficulty he dropped along the rope, hand under hand, and soon stood between the two who had preceded him.

"Sh! Lis'en!" hissed Bedrock, warningly.

Without that caution he would have been apt to notice the sounds to which it drew his attention. Certain long-drawn breaths told him there were sleepers at no great distance.

Hawk knew the ground thoroughly, and at once had a suspicion of the meaning of the sound. He gave a glance to the side, to where he knew the mouth of the inner *coul-de-sac* lay, and saw there, built in the narrow passage, a fire.

It had burned low, and its position shaded the glow from above, but the lieutenant understood it gave a light beyond which one could not well pass without being seen, and that most likely the rustlers were on guard beyond.

The sleepers whose breathing they could hear were doubtless the captured Black Doves.

"We are no better off than we were before," he whispered.

"There is only one way out of this, and that is right past yonder fire. They have cooped the Doves in here, and put a guard on the other side to see none of them get away. We might help the flock up the wall but what good is that going to do us?"

"Not much fur the present, but we'll do it ef we can't strike ary thing better. Hole on a bit, though. Like ez not they ain't a-watchin' ez clost ez they mout, an' I'll see ef thar ain't a chance ter git by an' explore a leetle. Needn't wake these hyer sleepers tell we want 'em. Stay hyer a bit tell yer sees how I prosper."

Hugging the edge of the wall he glided along, stooping low, and holding one hand outstretched before him, while the other rested on a revolver. He was not certain but what he was in as much danger from the Doves as from the rustlers.

His companions watched and waited. They could see nothing of him for a time and were in momentary expectation of an alarm. It hardly seemed possible for Primrose to proceed far without discovery, especially as he was passing directly by the sleeping men.

But pass he did, and after a little they had a glimpse of him, prone on the ground, and worming his way along between the fire and the wall of the narrow pass. It was but a brief view, for the next instant he vanished from sight, and Hawk drew a long breath.

"If we see nothing of him soon we will have to try the same path. It is more than likely he will never remember us again till he butts his head against a stone wall of some kind."

They did not have long to wait, however.

Few men could move with more stealth, or knew better how to take what seemed desperate chances. He knew by instinct there must be a guard on the watch, but he felt as sure that he would be careless, and perhaps asleep.

The guard was there, and not asleep; but his

attention was at that moment fixed in another direction. His Winchester rested between his knees, as he sat on the ground, his head turned, while he gazed at something going on in the valley beyond. Primrose did not know, but he suspected there must be something of interest transpiring, that had called away the remaining sentinels, and that this fellow was wishing he could go, too.

The chance was too good to be lost, however much of danger might threaten for the afterward.

Bedrock gathered his feet under him, measured the distance, and then hurled himself upon the rustler. As the man went down, one arm of the assailant closed around his neck, while from the other side a broad hand was pressed upon his mouth, effectually shutting off anything like a cry.

The hug was worse than that of a bear, and the struggles of the man ceased almost as soon as they began. Bedrock understood the work, and had his victim insensible in short order. Then he darted to the fire, and made a motion that told the two watchers the coast was clear. They followed the course he had taken, and soon stood by his side.

"Thar's s'uthin' centerest in goin' on thar, an' we want ter be on ther ground afore ther fun's over."

He pointed in the direction in which the rustler had been looking, and then they saw torches, a crowd, the glare of a lately-lit fire, and a man swinging over the blaze, head downward.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HOW IT WENT IN THE POCKET.

LIKE a wolf at bay, Captain Columbo submitted to his captors, and never uttered a sound.

Of course he did not know until the last moment what was coming, but he had reason to suspect the worst, and had time to brace his nerves to meet it.

Yet, when the fire began to crackle, and the flames to flash merrily upward, he would have been more than human if he had not writhed a little, and tried to keep himself out of their way.

Alta sprung forward, but Ready Rank was too quick for her, and tossed her back into the most convenient arms there to receive her; and they were arms that held her tightly, too. Her interference could do no good, and might bring immediate harm to her.

The diabolical play went on without interruption.

The rustlers had gazed on such scenes before, and if they had done anything would have mocked the victim. Alta was almost insensible through emotion, and Miss Matilda was speechless from fright. There were two men there who would gladly have flung themselves forward to the rescue, without a thought of what sort of a man Captain Columbo might be, but just then they could each feel a cold muzzle touching the nape of the neck, and knew nothing could be done.

The fire grew hotter.

As yet Columbo had saved his head, but it was only a question of seconds when the flames would run up his hair, and take hold of his clothing. If he intended to talk, certainly the time was at hand.

He kept his peace, however; and then—some one was talking for him.

The three intruders, once they saw what was going on, came boldly forward, well aware the attention of every one would be riveted on the terrible play before them.

Who the prisoner was they did not stop to inquire; not likely was it they could have learned more if they had. Nor had they any plan of action laid out. All they thought of was getting near to the accursed scene.

"Will you tell the whole truth, now?" asked Ready Rank, wondering that the man could so long keep silent.

As he spoke, something bright hissed over his head, and touched the rope by which Captain Columbo was suspended.

The cord parted with a snap, dropping the writhing figure upon the fire, but as he fell Columbo twisted his face upon his breast, and struck the flames with his shoulders. Then, he bounded up as if on springs, regained his feet, and dashed forward, overturning two of the rustlers who were in his path.

At once a snarl arose from the whole pack, and he would have dropped before he had gone another pace had it not been for Rank.

"Steady boys! No powder! Run him down; he cannot go far, and I want him for my own table!"

It did not seem as though he could possibly make his escape. With his hands bound together it would be safe enough for the first man who got within reaching distance to lay hold of him.

Like hounds upon a fox they closed in to seize him.

It was Bedrock who cast the knife which cut him down, and the tramp motioned his companions to remain silent as they were. Every eye was turned toward the flying prisoner, and no one would be apt to observe them as long as they did not attract attention to themselves.

It was too late to think of retreat, since Columbo was heading straight for the niche in which the Doves were sleeping, under watchful guard as the rustler supposed.

As he ran along he uttered a peculiar sound, something like the mourning of a dove; which was answered from the prison pen by a dozen cries of the same nature. The tumult without had aroused the outlaws, and to them it seemed as though there had been an attack on the rustlers, and that Columbo was coming to their rescue.

Without any settled object in view the fugitive headed straight for them, and dashed into the group of hastily aroused men.

"I'm with you, boys, if I cannot do you much good!" was his cry.

"One of you cut my hands loose, quick. I'll fight the devils with the bare knuckles if I can do no better."

"Take it easy, captain," said one who had a pocket knife, and who severed the bands as he spoke.

"They will hardly do much harm to us. We're too much of a feather."

"Don't you believe it! Ready Rank is just a fiend. He wanted to torture me first of all; but your turn would have come next."

Without hesitation two or three of the rustlers had followed closely at his heels, not thinking of any possible danger when he turned at bay. As they passed the fire one of them gave it a rousing kick, so that the flames started up once more, illuminating the pocket, and giving them light to mark their game.

This was as favorable for Columbo as it was for them. He had little hope of mercy if taken, and in such a strait was ready to die trying to make his teeth meet. His hands once free and he wheeled, striking fiercely at the nearest rustler, who was springing upon him with outstretched arms.

The man went down, and Columbo followed his stroke, landing on him with both knees, while his hands were dropping to the belt around his waist.

The example was contagious. Another Dove wrenched away the carbine on the back of the prostrate rustler, while the rest overwhelmed the two men who had not time to draw their weapons before the rush came. In a twinkling there were half a dozen Doves armed and casting themselves at others of the rustlers who had entered the pocket as careless as their predecessors.

The Doves were not as harmless as they had seemed.

When the drop was on them they had thrown up their hands without resistance, hoping they would be able to fraternize later on with the men who were in hiding like themselves.

But the drop was not on them now, and they were possessed with the idea their lives depended on the fight they made.

They were if anything too desperate, for those who had caught the weapons from the prisoners began firing at the rustlers as they passed the fire, and few of the shots were wasted.

All this took but a brief time. Ready Rank had not at first joined in the pursuit, but stood watching the chase.

"Yoicks, tally-ho!" he shouted, as he saw Columbo plunge into the narrow pass leading into the pocket.

"You have him now! Bring him this way, and we will see no rope breaks again."

It seemed strange that his men did not reappear; when the sound of the scattering shots began to come to his ears he knew there was a hitch in the programme, and started toward the spot himself. In his wake went all the rustlers save three who were on guard over the prisoners. They cocked their revolvers and looked serious.

There were just three of them—one for each of the crouching three at their backs; and their gaze was fixed so intently on the prisoners they had eyes for nothing else. Bedrock saw the opportunity, and was certain Helen could not be restrained for much longer. He partially rose up, and gave a signal.

If he and Hawk succeeded in getting away with their men without trouble, they would be in time to help Helen with hers. If they failed, the girl would have her revolver to help her out; and the prisoners might strike in to the rescue.

The two men struck from the shoulder, but Helen clubbed a revolver, and delivered a crushing blow. There was no need for the fears of Primrose. She had her man down first of all, for her catlike leap was the quickest.

"I'm afeared I heard a skull crack but thar's no investergashuns needed. W'ot we want are ter git a move on. Heel yerself, Mr. Stafford, an' Pony, you better do likewise. Then pu'purtrate ther grand skip. Sich luck amazin' can't last forever."

Stafford and young Taylor were quick to take advantage of the position, and Lieutenant Hawk sprung to Alta's side.

"I got you into this difficulty; it is no more than right it should be mine to get you out. Come! While they are raving over yonder you have your chance. In a moment they will be back. Be brave as you were and all will go well."

He tried to lead her away, but she broke from him.

"Unhand me! Let me go to him! It was your vile plot brought him to this, and I will stay by him to the end."

Taylor meantime turned to Bedrock.

"What is the game? Those fellows in there seem to be making a fight for it; if we fell on the rustlers from behind it would be an even thing of it if we didn't clean them out between us."

"An' ther Doves make jest one mouthful ov us w'ot war left a'rter we got through with ther rustlers. Reckon you'd sooner Helen fell inter Columbo's han's than them ov Ready Rank; but thar's blame leetle ch'ice."

"Helen!"

Taylor started in surprise. He had not recognized the boy, of whom he had scarcely a glimpse; but as her name dropped from his lips she was at his side.

CHAPTER XXXIV. TO FIND HELP.

"HELEN is here."

"(Good heavens! If you were only a thousand miles away!)"

In spite of the clinging touch on his shoulder there was no mistaking the heartiness with which Pony Taylor answered her.

The girl was not angry. She understood well enough his meaning.

"Ah, did you think I would fail to be near you when you were in the hands of that wretch?"

"And my safety depending on your keeping out of his reach?"

To this there was no immediate answer ready, and before she could frame one Bedrock was sounding an alarm.

"Thar's no time ter be moonin' hyer. Betcher life they're a-comin' back, an' we want ter mosey. I ain't no cent'rest in fightin' rustlers 'cept ez it's a hev-to inserdental. They shoot too blame straight w'en they pick trigger."

"Then, if you are going to, take the lead!" exclaimed Hawk, looking over Alta's shoulder.

"This child refuses to move. She is bound to wait for that old villain—and how can I leave her?"

"Kin yer reach Banty King in time? That's ther ques'shun. Ef yer kin, it's w'uth ther tryin'. We kin cover yer 'treat, an' stan' 'em off tell they think it's time ter make a move; but it goes 'thout sayin' we can't all git away, with fourteen thousand yards ov caliker ter bundle along."

"Columbo is with the Doves, and if I thought you could keep him there I would try to make the rifle. I don't see my way clear, but there is one, and perhaps you can show it."

"I kin see ther road out fur one ov us, an' in course you hev ter be ther one. Any one else couldn't work ther back racket; an' I'm 'most 'feared you won't hev ther strength, but we'll hev ter reesk it. Thar's a string ov hosses down thar, an' we make a break. You git one, an' light out. Ef y'r hez luck it ain't likely they kin stop you. We'll play we're goin' w'en we git riddy—but we won't git riddy fur a while yit."

"Why not all try it?"

"All these weemin inloodid?" queried Bedrock, with a gesture of scorn.

"Thar's two minuits left ter run the gang. Then it'll be too late. Are ye goin'?"

"Yes. But look after Columbo till I get back. If he finds that rope we left against the wall he'll bark back to the Flat, and I'll lose him forever."

The conversation was hurried; and at its conclusion their movements were prompt.

"You thet wanten kin try ter work ther same racket," whispered Primrose as he led the way.

"Ther chaintes are ten ter one you'll git shot, but I ain't a-holdin' ov yer hyer. W'en pard gits started I'm goin' ter try another trick, but it's reesky, too."

Bedrock was pretty nearly right in his logic. The more moving marks there were the more likelihood of a chance shot finding its billet. It was hardly possible they could find and overcome all the sentinels on the way before someone in their party was hit.

"Surely, you do not intend to desert the ladies?" asked Stafford, who had been somewhat bewildered with the strangeness of the changing situations.

"In course not. Pony an' me kin work ther oracle, an' be back in a minnit. It's them ez makes ther complerkashun. Better git 'em back ter kiver."

The three men moved on, and Helen went with them. Stafford was left in charge of the other ladies—and he did not care to remain in that spot a second longer than was necessary. If Alta would move there would be little trouble with the other two.

"Miss Bainbridge, it is not wise to remain in such a dangerous position. If you do not care to leave the den altogether, let us at least try and get back to the shelter of the cave. I don't intend to desert you, but I have strong reasons for the course I propose."

Miss Alta was staring toward the pocket, where they could hear quite plainly the sounds of strife. She had tried, indeed, to move in that

direction, but her limbs failed to carry her. She had simply the strength to stand still and listen, knowing not what dreadful thing she expected next.

She heard dumbly Stafford's words, and then drooped toward him.

"As you will. I cannot desert him; but, oh, I dare not remain here. Take me out of sight, but not beyond reach if they call for me."

"Poor child, you hardly know what you are saying. Those others seem to have left us to shift for ourselves, but I will protect you as far as my life goes, though Ready Rank, bad as he seems, would hardly have the heart to harm you."

Gently he urged her away from the spot, and Marquita and Aunt Tilly dropped in behind them. Stafford had forgotten Marquita was of the Doves, and that it might be she would be of help to them in case they sought for a hiding-place among the recesses of the inner caves.

By the time they reached the ledge, Bedrock and the rest were at work among the horses. There was a sharp challenge from the guard, and then some rapid shooting. The sentinels were on the alert, and it would have been next to impossible for the whole party to have made their escape in that direction. The rustlers were only to be found by their voices, and it was through the diversion worked by the rest that Hawk was able to get to the horses.

He glided within a yard of the back of a rustler who was peering in the direction of Bedrock, and dove recklessly under the heels of the alarmed mustangs.

Once there and he was hidden from view, and ready for work.

There was little chance to pick for quality, and he knew he was as likely as not to hit upon a vicious brute, who would try hard to buck his backbone in two the moment he mounted. The horses the rustlers rode were selected solely for speed and endurance.

The brute which allowed him to approach with the least show of fright or anger was the one he wanted, and he was fortunate in finding an opportunity to cut its rope without exciting much commotion in the line.

"Steady, now!" he muttered.

"I'd give a hundred or so out of a possible five thousand if it was my own mustang I had hold of, but I guess you will do. It's something of a risk for you, my beauty, but if you catch lead on the way out, you will know you die in a noble cause. Houp-lal! Here we go!"

As noiselessly as possible he had been edging the animal out from the line, turning its head down the pass through which the rustlers had entered the nest. Then he flung himself lightly upon its back, lying low along the animal's neck, and was away.

No need was there for him to utter a word of warning to tell his pards he was off. They were watching as closely as the guards, and with a knowledge of the point to which their gaze was to be directed. Bedrock saw the first movement of the mustang as Hawk urged it out from the string, and was ready to retreat.

"He's off now, ef he's a-goin', an' we can't help him a bit furdur, unless he drops this side er ther kenyon, w'ich ain't likely. Back we go, ter look arter Stafford an' ther ladies."

As he spoke he led the way, for though the guards would not desert the horses, he had no doubt that unless he was more involved in business with the Doves than was likely, Ready Rank would send men to know the meaning of the shots he must have heard; and the old man did not intend to be taken between two fires if he could help it.

"If you could only have gone with him!" groaned Pony Taylor, as the three sped along back, and speaking to his sister.

"But for you I would ask nothing better than to make a fight here with Rank, in spite of his gang. This last attack has been one too many, and I feel as though I dared not leave him until he was off the trail forever. But I can take no such risks now, even if common manhood did not prevent my desertion of the rest."

"Oh, you are a little wild," answered the girl, lightly.

"If you only knew how anxious I was to get in you would not wonder that I am slow to get out. And, listen to that firing in the pass. Would you like to know I was running that gantlet?"

As the sounds she spoke of came to his ears, Taylor shuddered. The fugitive was having a close call, if, indeed, he was not already dead. The outpost was larger than expected, and was wasting no time in words, but shooting to kill.

"And yet there is a chance for him; and there would have been a chance for you. Hark! Was that an answering shot? If so, he is past the greatest danger, and if he knows the way as well as I suspect, he can make the run, after all."

"Who is he? Why does he leave us?"

"Do not ask me, for I cannot tell. He has been one of the outlaws; but it seems as though it was for a purpose. If he can be trusted he is going for help. We must manage to hold the fort until he returns, and then be in condition to render aid and comfort. Now, no more talk. Unless I can see the way to something better we

must follow orders. It is this man's say-so, since he seems to have engineered everything so far."

The nature of the ground was beginning to tell somewhat on Bedrock, as they made their way upward, but he kept pace with the Taylors gamely until they stood on the ledge.

"I wisht I knowed whar Stafford are," muttered Bedrock, halting a moment to breathe.

"He orter 'a' waited hyer tell we all got tergether ag'in. Thar's a way out through ther rocks ef we on'y knowed it, though it wouldn't 'a' done fur him. Perhaps we could 'a' got it outen some one if we had 'a' tried fur it. Strikes me, a preesner er two wouldn't be a bad thing ter hev jest now. An', I sw'ar, I'd like ter know how ther trouble with ther Black Doves are a-comin' out. They don't seem ter be ez riled et one another ez they did. I ain't heard a shot sence we started ther boy on his rejoicin' way. An' thar's a slew ov 'em a-startin' ter see w'ot ther racket war. Ther centerestin' time are comin'—an', b'thunder, it are hyer now!"

Loth to leave the valley behind him without being satisfied on the points of which he was thinking, Bedrock lingered a trifle too long.

Two men came rushing out from the cave, and as they passed, one of them caught up the seeming boy, and with a flying leap from the ledge, recklessly taken, landed a dozen feet below, just as Ready Rank and half a dozen of his rustlers came rushing up the pathway.

With Helen still in his arms the man stumbled a little, plunged forward a few paces, and then wheeled, holding the girl for a shield as he pointed a revolver over her shoulder, ready for an attack, yet hesitating to fire.

"Stiddy, thar, ez you are! I've got her so she can't wiggle; an' ther fu'st move you fellers make terrads me I blow ther linin' outen her purty head. Stiddy, Pony, it's yer sister I'm talkin' ov."

The speaker was Lieutenant Jack, and Ready Rank uttered a cry of delight as he heard his words.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PONY SHOWS HIS PACES.

At first Ready Rank supposed the rope had broken under the strain, and that there would be no trouble in retaking the chief of the Black Doves. He enjoyed the play as a cat enjoys the struggles of the mouse in or near its claws.

When the fugitive dashed into the nook in which were confined the rank and file of the Doves he was not at all alarmed; and when he heard the first shots, it only seemed to him the guard there had been hasty in firing.

A little later, from the tumult raised he knew something had gone wrong, and hurried to the spot himself.

As he neared the pocket, he shouted:

"Back, all of you, but keep your weapons trained on the path. There is some treachery here, and we don't want to lose good men. What is it, you? Who is doing all this shooting?"

He could see several men staggering back, and hear a groaning from a man or two lying on the ground. The Doves had hit hard in the few moments the battle had been joined.

"Some of them in there have got arms, and are showing fight," was the answer from one of the men who had come up in time to see what was going on.

"There's a lot of the boys down, but we would have cleaned the ranch if you hadn't called us off. The crowd is together now, and we know what we are looking for. Say the word and we'll bring them out in a twinkling."

"Hold hard, all of you! They have the inside track as long as that fire is burning. We can roast them out, but what's the use to lose men, when we have a double cinch on them by waiting? Half a dozen of you can hold them cooped till morning, when we can pick them off from above. Say, you in there. Can you hear sense?"

"Ay, and talk it, too," came back the answer in the tones of Columbo.

"We have the arms now, and are ready to fight it out to the death. Keep off your pack or it will be the worse for your hounds."

"So you say, but I want the men in there who are backing you up to understand they are in a mighty bad box. I had no quarrel with them, and by to-morrow they could have had the nest to themselves. If they choose to throw up their hands and come out they will be safe still. If they don't take the chance right off the handle it will never come again. There is a guard of a dozen men here, and if you think they are not able for you, try it on and see. We can hold you there till you starve to death, or come out."

"Thanks for the chance, but I think we will stay here a while and starve. The quarters are not as bad as those you had fixed up for me, and all we ask is to be let alone."

"Alone goes! Guard them, boys, and keep out of their sight! If a head shows itself over the dead line, down it for keeps."

The trouble at the horses had begun, and with these parting orders Rank left the guard at its post and hurried away. He knew not what was the fresh alarm, but his first thought was that Taylor had broken away in an effort to escape.

If that was all, it was not serious, so long as he remained unarmed.

Before he had gone far the rustler chief caught a glimpse of figures moving up from below. In one of them he thought he recognized Taylor, though at that distance he was uncertain. The blaze over which he had been trying to toast the captain of the Black Doves had subsided, and by moonlight alone he could not see far with distinctness.

He saw their steps were directed toward the ledge by which the cave was reached, and changed his course accordingly. Going carelessly he stumbled over a motionless man, lying prone in his way, and recognized one of the rustlers who had been guarding the prisoners.

"Pony Taylor's work, no doubt," was his thought.

"If I did not have further use for him I could drop him with a shot from here; but he can scarcely escape me anyhow."

He did not remember that if the senseless man left behind had passed through Taylor's hands his revolvers were hardly left also. Rocklessly he bounded up the path not far behind the three shadows, and he was only a few yards away when he saw the flying leap of his factotum, and heard the savage words of warning which followed.

"Hold her fast, Jack!" he shouted.

"For your life hold her fast! And you, Pony, come off the roof! We have you covered. Hands up, for the first and only time!"

"His han's are up, me lord; an' so are mine—but they hold sixes full. I got ye kivered, an' kin shoot ter a hair. W'en he drops you'll go out ov ther wet."

Bedrock saw the capture too late to prevent it, and checked the rush he was about to make in the wake of the rustlers at a glimpse of the men who were coming to his aid. He cast himself at full length upon the ledge, so that he was invisible to those below, and when Rank spoke turned one of his guns toward him, while with the other he tried to draw a bead on the man who held Helen in his grasp.

"Fu'st one an' then t'other—'f it warn't fur ther girl I could pick 'em off afore they had chaine ter crook a finger," he thought; but he could not be sure of his aim in that uncertain light, and waited with his triggers while he cast the bluff at the rustler.

"Hello! Who are you?" answered Rank, coolly.

"I didn't know we were dealing you a hand in this game, but if you want one bad the cards may as well drop your way while we are at it. If you shoot me salt won't save you, and before you are much older one of the boys will find where you are hiding and have you in the same box you say you got me. But, if I knew just who you are I would know better whether I have got to come down."

Rank laughed carelessly as he spoke. He could smooth the savage fierceness out of his tones as quickly as any man who ever drew breath.

"Oh, I'm ole Uncle Bedrock, w'ich are sometimes called Ragged Rufe fur short. Maybe I've been heard ov, ez a shuter frum Shootersville. Ef so yer must know it's straight goods I'm a-given ov yer. Come, now, can't we dicker?"

Ready Rank was sure the man, whoever he was, spoke by card. No one who was not as cool as an iceberg, and sure he could back up his words with deeds, would have been willing to make the bluff. There was something like a deadlock, and while he was talking he was thinking of the best way to have it broken.

"Dug-gone ye!" growled Jack, shielding himself more and more behind the captive he held, "can't yer see I hev ther dead medecine on ther gal? You ain't wantin' ter kill weemin, but that's wot you'll do ef you turn them frills up a inch higher."

"You blazin' idjeot! Do I look like a man ez keered fur a gal, more er less, ef so be she hez ter go outen ther range? I'm jest a-playin' fur fun, ez ary one ez knows ole Bedrock 'll tell yer. Ah! I got yer now!"

And, utterly careless of the fearful chances he was taking, Bedrock sent a bullet where his keen eye was resting.

Jack had craned his neck a trifle too far upward in an attempt to see the speaker, and at the same moment Helen had crouched, with every nerve quivering for a spring as she felt the grasp on her relaxing under the influence of the deep interest the rustler was taking in what was beyond.

The bullet went true to the mark, plowing deeply along the top of the skull that was not hard enough to stop or turn its course.

As the arms that had encircled hers in their bear-like grasp dropped away, Helen bounded forward, reckless of everything but standing by the side of her brother. She did not know the double danger into which she thrust herself. The finger of Primrose was about to tighten once more upon the trigger of his self-acting revolver, the muzzle of which was lying in line with Ready Rank's brain.

And Ready Rank, too, was holding straight across her course. The only wonder was that Pony had not dropped before she sprung.

The young man saw his chance, and was quick to improve it. His hands were up, in the position they had assumed at the hail of the rustler. He had not wanted to die until he could make one good, square effort to save, or, if not to save, to avenge his sister.

He had watched Rank edging nearer, inch by inch, during the conversation, until now he was but a few paces to the rear of his henchman.

At the crack of Bedrock's pistol he uttered a hoarse cry, and leaped downward like a tiger, passing over the head of Helen as she came.

Before Rank, staggered by Helen's flight, could see what was intended, Pony Taylor had his arms around him, with a gripe stronger and more savage than that of a bear. Each hand clasped its opposite arm to make the circle of steel complete, and raising the rustler chief aloft he tightened the awful pressure until the bones began to crack.

At the same time, he staggered backward, up the ledge.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MARQUITA IS NOT AS DEAF AS SHE SEEMED.

THE principal difficulty Stafford had with Miss Alta was to get her away from the spot, which seemed to have a strange and terrible fascination for her; but, once fairly within the cave she was willing enough to follow his lead.

He was not without a motive in his return, beyond the simple one of hiding. He sought to make his way back to the room from which they had been led to witness the torture of Captain Columbo.

"Pity the rest are not with us," he thought, as he passed through the portal leading from the outer world. "That door could hold the villains at bay for a long time, and perhaps would enable us to make an escape altogether. There must be some method here of reaching the outside of the valley, or how did those rustlers find their way through while the others were entering by the pass?"

Had he thought of it, perhaps Hawk would have mentioned the door, the existence of which was known to him; but though anxious for the safety of the ladies, he was trusting them to Bedrock and the rest, while he went for the aid necessary to carry out his own plans, and make the escape of all a certainty.

Once away from the faint light at the entrance and the passage was wrapped in a gloom impenetrable, and Stafford was guided by memory alone. It seemed to him he could remember the turns to be made, and the way was not long or difficult.

Nevertheless, it was more by luck than by good judgment he groped along, his hand touching the arm of his charge, while Aunt Tilly and Marquita followed so closely that when at length he halted suddenly they both lurched against him heavily.

Fortunately they understood what had happened, and made no sound. They were just at the threshold of the room for which the man of railroads was seeking, and some one was there before them.

Lewis Stafford cautiously pushed aside the curtain he had felt as he stopped, and peered into the room, which was the one they had lately left.

All there was darkness; but as he looked a match was struck sharply, and he could see the man known as Jack standing there, the feebly flaming match held above his head, while he stared around in search of the lamp, which had been extinguished.

He saw, too, the papers lying as Ready Rank had cast them aside, and without thought of the danger to himself was springing to grasp them when Jack touched the flame of the match to the wick of the at last found lamp.

"Wot's that?" exclaimed the rustler, throwing up his pistol to line with the one hand, while he finished his task with the other.

"It is I, Lewis Stafford, one of the prisoners," was the prompt answer.

"Columbo is away and with his men, and there are signs of trouble in the valley. Your captain bundled us back to be out of the way of danger, and wants you to his aid."

With the curtain drawn aside the sounds of pistol-shots rolled in, faintly, yet with a distinctness not to be misunderstood. The rustler listened and never doubted.

"In er minnit! Thar's some papers hyer—"

"I am to take care of them if they are to be found. They will be safe enough with me until your return, and Ready Rank is not the man to wait."

"That's so. An' ef thar's danger he wants Jack ter ther front. I'm thar in a holy minnit!"

He waited no longer, but dashed away, leaving the coast clear for Stafford and his charge.

The magnate thought he was losing no time, but Marquita was before him. She had glided past and caught up the papers, looking over them with a strange interest, for one afflicted as she was supposed to be.

Her eyes ran over them intelligently, and at last she held one up, tapping lightly on it to call the attention of the gentleman to the lines lying at the point of her shapely finger.

"Last will and testament of Raymond Trainor."

So the document read; and that was what he had expected to find, though almost thinking he was hoping against hope.

How it had come to be in the hands in which he had seen it he did not trouble himself to consider. He only knew he wanted the document, and reached out his hand to grasp it.

Marquita nodded her head, and yet, raising her hand behind her back, held it beyond his reach as, with her other hand she pointed at Alta.

Stafford nodded as he followed her finger. It was to himself more than to her that he spoke aloud:

"I understand. She has an interest in it? If so I will see, so far as I can, that her rights are protected. I knew there was a mystery in the matter, and my own interests shall count for nothing if we get safely out of here. Justice shall be done if it takes a million."

He was looking at her as he spoke, and it seemed to him she must understand his words better than one who simply heard by sight. At the same time he remembered she was of the Doves. If she took such interest in Alta could she not further her escape?

"There is a way out of this, and unless we find it no one can tell what danger is in store for us, or how long that paper will be allowed to remain in my keeping. Can you not aid us?"

Marquita looked around her, as if to make sure there was no one near to hear the words; then she nodded, and pointed away in the darkness.

Other gestures she made which seemed to say that she knew, though she was not supposed to. Whatever might be wrong with her organs of speech her hearing was not as defective as she had chosen to make others believe.

"Then we will take advantage of it; and if you desire to go out into the world you can do it under my care, and I promise you shall never know want so long as I am able to provide for you."

Her only answer was to take the lead, carrying with her the lamp.

It was hard to tell whether the passage through which they made their way was done by the hand of nature or of man. Perhaps man had improved on what nature had done. The entrance to it was well concealed, and Stafford, unaided by her, would have looked a long time before he could have found it.

Once in the narrow tunnel, however, and the way was plain before them, though so narrow two could not walk abreast. One after another they filed along, Marquita leading, until at length they were stopped by a solid door.

Their guide stooped a little and held the lamp down, as if somewhat at fault. Then, when she applied her strength to it it did not move.

"Is it locked?" Stafford asked, in some uneasiness.

"Let me change places with you. If the door has to be forced I am the stronger."

Marquita put her hand behind her, upon his breast, and pushed him away. She understood the position best of all, and wanted no help, even though at first she was puzzled.

Again she ran the light along the crack of the door, from top to bottom, and this time saw the three bolts, holding it so firmly to its place.

One after another she shot them back, and giving a pull with the last one, the short, heavy planks swung back, revealing a patch of darkness beyond. In his eagerness Stafford would have advanced at once, but again the mute stopped him. She held the lamp in front of her, and pointed downward through the orifice.

Her gestures meant they were to proceed with caution, and the man of means was wise enough to take the hint. He looked over her shoulder and saw they had come to the side of a shaft, which still led downward, while there was no telling how far the surface of the ground was above their heads.

"It looks as though they did not intend to have a surprise from this side," muttered Stafford, not at all certain their further progress was not unsurmountably barred.

"Three bolts to the secret door, and the rope to the shaft probably missing. What will we do?"

Marquita showed him what was to be done. She placed the lamp on the rock at her feet, and holding to the frame of the doorway, leaned forward as far as she could reach. There was a rope there, after all; though it had swung clear off to the other side of the pit.

"Ah, I see! There will be a scramble for it, and I am not sure I am in as good condition for the work as I was a dozen years ago. I will have to try it all the same. It may be safe to linger here, but I doubt it; and as to looking for any aid from Taylor and the others, the idea is nonsense. They will have their hands full attending to their own case. Ready Rank will never allow them to reach the cave again. It would have been better for them all to have tried this way."

While he was mumbling this to himself, he was throwing off his coat, and nerving himself for the work before him. When he again attempted to pass Marquita, she offered no resist-

ance, but crouched back to enable him to reach the rope she still held in her hand.

He grasped the rope; but before parting, had a word to say to his charges.

"I do not know how far upward this thing runs, but from the looks of things I judge there will be quite a climb. In case I succeed in reaching the top in safety, I will draw the rope up and then lower the end. One of you must tie it under your arms, and I will draw her up. As Miss Bainbridge is the lightest weight, it will be best she goes first. I will have her help, then, for the remaining part of the task. Promise me, Miss Bainbridge, that you will do exactly as I say."

"What else is there for me to do?" responded Alta, wearily.

"I have thought it over, and perhaps, if I am no longer in the hands of the rustlers, they will not be so cruelly hard with my father. I may, indeed, be able to help him; for it is money they are after, and nothing else."

"Without a doubt; and if we get safely away I have some of my own to spare if yours don't reach—though I am afraid Ready Rank knows it will go further than you think. Now, be brave. I know nothing of the venture on which I am going, but think it will soon be over. Here we go!"

Speaking lightly, but feeling more deeply than he was willing to show, Stafford swung himself out into the shaft, and began his ascent.

Success had neither hardened his heart nor softened his muscle. Hand over hand he drew himself upward, encouraged by the stars which seemed to be twinkling at no great distance above.

Before his nerves had been shaken, or his strength seriously exhausted, his hands touched the windlass at the top. It seemed old but firm and strong.

He threw one arm over it, and still holding to the rope with the other hand, managed to place his feet upon the ground at the mouth of the shaft. Then he staggered away with a feeling of the most intense relief. The most dangerous part of the effort was over.

All about him had been so quiet, it was the grand surprise of his life when he was grasped from behind, twisted from his feet, and borne backward to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"YOU ARE MY PRISONER."

WHEN the man known as Lieutenant Hawk made his desperate attempt to escape by means of one of the rustlers' horses, he knew what he was doing; and there was no doubt Rufus Primrose knew what he wanted to do.

It would have been possible to choose a surer way, but if would have had to be taken on foot—and a mount was what Hawk wanted just then. After seeing how things were going in the camp of the rustlers there was no time to be lost.

Of course, it looked like desertion of the others; but then, it was impossible for the ladies to try the same scheme, and he had hopes that under the guidance of Bedrock they might secure a temporary safety at the very least, lasting until he should return.

Fortune had favored him wonderfully well in the choice of a mustang.

The animal was frightened and restive, but it submitted the moment he was squarely in the saddle. Before he had gone a dozen paces he knew he could trust it with his life.

Of course, he was not certain where the sentinels who guarded the approaches were to be looked for; but with his knowledge of what had been going on in the time of the Doves he could make a shrewd guess. As he approached the first spot where he anticipated trouble he swung himself down by the side of his horse, the stirrup on the other side dangling loose; and no Indian could have done the trick neater. It seemed to be only a riderless animal, flitting by the outpost.

At any other time it is probable there would have been no firing; but an attempt to stop, or follow, and lasso the flying steed.

Now, the guard was on the alert. They had heard the sounds of the warring in the nest, though as yet they had no explanation of the sounds. When the horse came dashing out there was a suspicion of the trick being played, and nimble fingers were at once at work on the triggers.

With such perfect shots to the front, it was a wonder that either horse or rider got a step further. The best explanation to be given of the failure to kill, was that the rustlers fired at the spot they thought the man ought to be, and so missed him altogether.

"Now, go it, my friend!" Hawk muttered, as he rose in the saddle when the point of danger had been passed.

"If they had just had the sense to stick a horse in the way when they heard the noise of the ruction, they might have stopped me, but lead wouldn't do it; and now, nothing can. If I find King at the spot he ought to be, if he got my message all will go well, in spite of the double odds there will be against us."

"Ready Rank went entirely too far with Columbo to have any fear they will join forces, and all I am afraid of is that the captain will not wait for the rest, but slip out in the darkness. To find him anywhere else would be worse than useless—here, I have him foul."

It was well that both he and the mustang knew the road more than a little, or they might have come to grief in their headlong flight. Before Taylor and the others had reached the ledge in their retreat toward the cave, he had passed the spot where he and Bedrock turned adrift, Mazzeppa-fashion, the rustler who had attempted to take him to town; and now he had no longer any doubt that he had passed the furthest outpost, and was on safe ground.

It was with a feeling of consternation, then, he heard in front of him the sharp hail of:

"Halt! Hands up!"

This time the men understood their work, for he saw ranged in front of him a number of horsemen, and knew he could not expect to slip by them, or through them, without being the mark for more than one revolver.

He crouched low, gripped the sides of his horse tightly with his knees, and with a drawn revolver in either hand dashed straight at the outfit. In another instant he would have opened fire, when a second voice sung out:

"Don't be a fool, man! We have you, sure!"

"By the heavens! That's King, or I'm no prophet!" laughed back the fugitive, as he took a strong pull on his horse.

"What lucky wind brings you here?"

"Good enough, boys, it is Primrose himself; and bringing big news, or I am 'way off. Steady, pard. We are all on the war-path, and working for a double prize. What's the good news from above?"

"No news that is so good, but if we want to get in our work we will have to hustle around. There is war there; and some victims in the middle of the cross-fire whom we must save, or break a few girths trying it."

There were only one or two there who did not know who Primrose was, though the name of Hawk might have stumped the most of them. They crowded around while he explained the situation of affairs at the nest of the Black Doves.

"And, I tell you, pards, there is a chance for a hot deal before it's all over and done with; but if the old gent don't lose his luck I think we can play both ends against the middle, and get in our work after the most approved style."

"It don't look any too encouraging," growled King.

"There's almost as many of the Doves as we have in our party; and then, there are the cursed rustlers. They are a gang of a different color. Ready Rank's head is worth money; but, I swear! I don't care about fighting him."

"Nor I either, unless we hold the advantage, though more than one of his gang passed in their checks to-night, if I could judge by the noise of the fighting. But Columbo can be made our meat, sure; and if we can't take the prisoners from them—which I believe we can if they have done as well as I think—we can trade or bluff. They can't stand a siege in the pocket; and we had better let some of the minor ruffians get away than run any risks."

"But Rank is not the kind to be getting off. He always goes the whole figure, and will be just as likely as not to stay for spite."

"That is Ready Rank, to a dot; but, somehow, I have an idea Pony Taylor will attend to him. As we go along I can be explaining my ideas of the situation. There is a back door, about as dangerous as the front one; but it may be to our profit to use it. I'll see what you think when we have talked it over."

"And the ladies are all safe?"

"All safe, though since Rank came on the carpet I have had my fears for them."

"Thank Heaven for that!" exclaimed a voice near, and the speaker was young Thomas Bainbridge, though Primrose did not recognize him.

On the way there were more explanations. If the men had not thought their ends could be better accomplished in another way they would have been willing to charge straight through the pass, and open fight with the rustlers wherever they found them.

So it happened that when Stafford came climbing out of the shaft, "Banty" King was there to receive him; and before recognizing who his captive really was had twisted him off his feet with a regular thief-taker's swing.

"Hello! Who are you?" exclaimed King, turning the face of his prisoner around to the moonlight.

"You are no rustler, by the cut of your jib—and"—with a sudden access of respect—"if it is not Lewis Stafford, by all that is wonderful!"

"Stafford it is. For heaven's sake help me to get those ladies up from below. They will die with terror in the dark!"

And while this was going on, Primrose, with part of the men at his back, had pressed on to where he and Bedrock had made their descent into the nest. He was haunted with an idea Captain Columbo would find the rope against the rock, and attempt an escape.

He was just in time; and, as the outlaw came

over the ledge a man with drawn revolver confronted him, exclaiming:

"You are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LIEUTENANT HAWK RISES TO EXPLAIN.

STAFFORD, the moment he found into whose hands he had fallen, felt quite at his ease. When he discovered that King had a strong party behind him he was jubilant.

In the face of such a *posse* it was not likely the rustlers would trouble themselves much about their prisoners; and he felt sure the Doves would give them no trouble.

Hastily he sketched the position of affairs so far as he knew them, and the hopes he had that Bedrock and the Taylors had made good their retreat to the cave, and closed the door behind them. If they had done so in time it was possible the rustlers would allow them to remain unmolested until they had disposed of Captain Columbo and his Doves. And that would take some time.

"All right, then. We will try how it works," said King, without hesitation.

"One of us had better go down to help the ladies up, and when we have them safe we will look after the others. There has not been much time lost since my pard left here, and I guess if old Bedrock is running things, he has arranged the pace to suit himself."

It was a terrifying surprise for Alta when a stranger descended the rope, and Marquita would have turned to flee; but a few words of explanation reassured them, and one after the other the three ascended.

Alta went first of all—and was met by her cousin. He had left the task of rope-climbing to Banty King, as being more in his line; but he was none the less anxious to hold in his arms the girl who had been in much danger.

"And oh, Tom!" was her first exclamation.

"What is to become of poor father?"

"Hush, Alta! Save your sympathy for some one more deserving. It is as well to know the truth now as later on."

"You do not mean—?" she cried; and got no further.

"That he is not your father—yes. I have met one of the men to-night who is engaged in tracking him down. Think of him leniently if you choose; but it would be better not to think of him at all."

She threw herself weeping upon his breast, and for a little neither said a word.

Banty King was below and by himself, but he knew something of how the land lay, and had a light and his revolvers.

"It may not be the safest thing in the world to move in detachments, but I reckon I'll see a little of what lies around here before I go back. I can run as fast as the rustlers, and there is not much danger of any one getting in my rear."

He moved forward without much hesitation; and made no mistake in his way. Indeed, with the little instruction already had he could hardly make any. He passed through the room where the prisoners had been confined, and through the other compartments of the cave which led to the open air, hearing finally sounds from without that told him some one was near. He saw the open door, noting its strength, and then peered cautiously out.

He drew his head back hastily, for more than one pistol bullet was spattering against the rocky wall near by, but he had a glimpse of the scene.

Bedrock, with what seemed to be a struggling boy in his arm, was springing toward the door, while below the level of the ledge Pony Taylor was casting a crushed and quivering body from him.

The retreat was none too quickly made, and as Taylor followed in the wake of Primrose, Banty King swung to the door, and placed across it the bar which made a citadel of the cave.

"It's all right, pards," he laughed, as he saw the quick motion of Taylor's hand for the weapon at his waist.

"I'm your solid friend from 'way back, and have been helping the rest of them to get away. They are waiting for you outside, and the sooner we get there the better, unless you want to fight the rustlers for the fun of the thing."

"Nary fo'ut in mine, 'f it kin be holped," put in Bedrock. "I've hed solid fun by ther cubick ton ter-night, an' it'll las' me a week. But I ain't a-goin' tell we see whar ter look fur ter find ther royal treasury. You ain't seen Rank's headquarters yit, er you wouldn't be so bare-handed."

"Oh, if there is money going I am willing to look for it—that's what I do business for—but it mustn't take too long. Pards outside will grow restless, like; and the rovers may get at us yet."

"You needn't worry yourself about Ready Rank," said Taylor, as they grouped together at the mouth of the shaft.

"If I know anything about the strength of my arms he has troubled Helen for the last time. And we have all the spoils of war, if I mistake not. Don't linger here on account of the rustlers. With Rank out of the way the gang will break up and scatter—and you hardly have

men enough to take them in if you wanted to. How about the Black Doves?"

"I have Captain Columbo—the meat we were after. The road out is cut off, so that there is no danger of his men taking flight till the rustler gang chooses to let them. We had better move off to town. There is no use trying to explain things here; and unless we want more hard knocks than further profit I vote to be going."

The Lieutenant Hawk of the Doves—the Primrose of Banty King—felt safe enough on the score of his actions, but had his reasons for not wanting too much said as to the past until he could make sure of his present. As King was of the same opinion there was no delay about leaving the spot. Banty was a detective of no mean experience, and he knew that sometimes a part is better than the whole.

"But how did you come to get so near the spot where you were wanted?" asked young Primrose, as they rode along.

"You can thank young Bainbridge. Bedrock skipped from the bank without saying good-by, but Tom was out on the trail in no time, and caught a glimpse of him as he left the town. He followed on foot far enough to get the direction, and then hurried back toward town for a mount and help.

"On the way he met me. The rest was blind luck till we caught the fellow you turned adrift, and pinched him till he squealed. Tom saw the guide who met your father, and recognized something familiar about him that troubled him, and like a lad of sense he told me.

"Then I thought the best thing to do was to get him ready for the explosion, and I let the cat out of the bag. Blamed if he hadn't had some suspicions of his own; and took it in without much trouble. But how in the name of wrath did your old man come to get into the mix? I thought he had turned respectable, and was living the life of a nabob."

"Oh, it seems he has broken out again. Good luck it was, though if I had known he was on the war-path, I would have been troubled more than a little. Lucky, as it turned out, though. They took him for me, and Columbo would have liked nothing better than to have put his light out. It was a grand scheme to send him into the camp of the Doves. Columbo would either know how much knowledge he had, or have him very foul. But how did you get around the chief of the Doves?"

"He took me for a better man. Hawk passed in his chips in a quiet way some time ago, and left nothing behind but his reputation. It was tough when I had to abduct the daughter—if so she wasn't—but I had a double cinch on the matter, and took my chances like a little man."

"And this was the gentleman you told me I might find at the Flat?" asked Stafford, who had been listening to the conversation.

"You are right, though the father served your turn just about as well as he would have done. You have seen considerable, and found out a good deal. Before we get through we may teach you more."

The identification of Captain Columbo as the banker of Paddy's Flat was thorough enough, and the detectives secured the reward for his capture for which they had been working, as well as a handsome bonus from Lewis Stafford; but the inner facts of the case came out at a place widely remote from the Flat. A few words will explain them, though those few could be extended into a good many if space permitted.

A number of years ago two men known as Raymond Trainor and Thomas Bainbridge had been partners, but for reasons satisfactory to themselves they had exchanged names, which was better than a disguise if any one was looking for them. They were as different in appearance as could be.

Trainor, of the present, had a daughter in the East, living with an aunt by the name of Johnson. He had cared little for the girl's mother, and not at all for the child, from whom he had parted when she was too young to remember.

The two men hardly prospered, but they had some property, which might one day be valuable, and Trainor made a will which left it in trust with his partner till the girl was of age. Then, he accommodately died.

Bainbridge kept track of the child, and was wise enough to remit to her aunt enough to pay for her keeping. Being a grand rascal, he had several families of his own, which he did not support, therefore he did something for another family with which he was not connected at all by blood.

Nevertheless, life went a little hard with him, largely because he would not wait and be honest until the time came for a suitable stroke. He was tolerably strict in his accounts with his ward, although acknowledging her as his daughter. He even looked after the interests of a nephew of his who was being brought up in the same house with Alta.

Finally, when he was in the full tide of successful brigandage, the time drew near at hand when the farce was to end. Partly with her money he had started the bank at Paddy's Flat; and sent for her, and her cousin. He sold her interest in certain property which had become

valuable, getting a large payment in advance, and the rest to be paid when she came of age.

Uncertain whether he wanted to close the game or not, he took the means he had at hand to obtain her signature to whatever he wanted; and the abduction was so timed that in a day or so, during which her supposed father was to make no move, her signature would be of binding effect.

Marquita was his wife—or the last of the series to date. She had followed him of her own accord to the hills, and knew him only as an outlaw until certain circumstances opened her eyes. Owing to past experiences, Captain Columbo had an idea that a dumb wife would be the best for choice, but perhaps he made a mistake. Alta would have freely given her of her means, and Stafford offered her a modest competency; but she refused both, and went to her own people, who were supposed to be robbers among the Mexicans.

Pony Taylor and his sister did not remain long at the Flat. They were there on a trail of vengeance, which Primrose and the rest took out of their hands. They were satisfied, however, since they were pretty sure Ready Rank would trouble them no more by his attentions to Helen. He had been more fervent than bashful in his wooing, and if Pony had been willing for her to play the part of a Sabine, he might have succeeded at last. Their father had been one of the victims of Bainbridge—or Trainor—but they had nothing to say when the law was done with the latter.

Stafford had the interest in the matter he mentioned; but in addition he was an uncle to somebody, though it took some little time for him to make out whether it was to Tom, or the young lady. His sister had married a Bainbridge, and died, years before. Only lately, in searching records he had been started on the trail.

He gathered together the fragments of Alta's fortune, found it had not been as badly wrecked as he feared, and transplanted his niece to a more congenial location, where she could flourish and be happy.

Miss Matilda continued to follow the fortunes of her young relative; and, what was remarkable, from the time she was once fairly in the clutches of the Black Doves, she lost all the poetic tendencies for which she had been renowned, and ever after talked nothing but the baldest of every-day common sense.

And the great, original Bedrock!

He occasionally poses as a man of means and ease; sometimes he assists his son, the renowned detective; and occasionally he breaks out as a full fledged tramp, acting the part so well that no one can tell the difference. When Rufus, Jr. and "Banty" King urged him to return north with them, he shook his head.

"Thanks, but I see a glimmerin' ov fun ahead, an' got ter intervoo a man at ther Gulch. Ou revware; perhaps I'll see yer later!"

And he slung his bundle over his shoulder by the huge stick he carried, and trudged silently down the road.

THE END.

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